

# **STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: LESSONS FROM TONGA**

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**STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL  
ASSESSMENT AND THE SUSTAINABLE  
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# Abstract

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Tonga faces distinctive environmental, economic and social challenges emanating from increasing development pressures. In recognition of the sustainable development challenges faced by many nations around the world, the United Nations Development Programme adopted a new sustainability perspective in 2015, commonly known as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a systematic process that integrates environmental considerations into decision making and aims to help achieve sustainable development. This study aimed to find context specific approaches for using SEA to integrate the SDGs into national policy and planning processes of Tonga. An institutional analysis was conducted to understand the current policy planning and decision making processes in response to incorporating the SDGs from the global to the national level of implementation. Key informant interviews with representatives from government, business and communities involved in national planning and decision making processes were conducted in Tonga. From the interviews it is clear that although the SEA concept is fairly new to most of the informants, some of the elements of SEA are already in practice. However, SDGs are not fully understood within government, business and communities. While this research resonates with key findings of Polido et al.,(2014) who advocated linking and promoting the SEA process to enable a change in decision making paradigm and supporting good governance, distinctive cultural and temporal factors are also emerging, supporting the key argument that SEA needs to be context specific in order to advance the sustainability agenda in Tonga.

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# Table of Contents

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<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 Research rationale.....	11
1.2 Problem statement .....	12
1.3 Research question.....	14
1.4 Research objectives .....	14
1.5 Research scope .....	15
1.6 The Kingdom of Tonga .....	15
1.7 Methodology .....	18
1.8 Thesis structure.....	19
<b>2 SEA and the Sustainable Development Goals: Theoretical Perspectives .....</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	22
2.2 Sustainable development: global perspective.....	22
2.3 Sustainable Development Goals .....	24
2.4 Strategic Environmental Assessment Theory.....	27
3. Integrated (Incremental) model.....	34
2.5 SEA and sustainable development.....	35
2.6 SEA in Small Island States.....	42
2.7 Conceptual model of SEA and sustainable development goals .....	50
<b>3 Institutional Analysis: Theory and Practice in Tonga.....</b>	<b>52</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	53
3.2 National planning processes in Tonga .....	53
3.3 Sustainability considerations in Tonga .....	57
3.4 Institutional theory .....	59

3.5	<i>Conclusion</i> .....	66
<b>4</b>	<b>Research Methods</b> .....	<b>68</b>
4.1	<i>Introduction</i> .....	69
4.2	<i>Case Study Approach</i> .....	69
4.3	<i>Theoretical Framework</i> .....	70
4.4	<i>Research Methods</i> .....	70
4.5	<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	76
4.6	<i>Methodological Considerations and Challenges</i> .....	79
4.7	<i>Conclusion</i> .....	81
<b>5</b>	<b>Results: Institutional Analysis</b> .....	<b>82</b>
5.1	<i>Analysis of Formal Institutions: Document Analysis</i> .....	83
5.2	<i>Analysis of Informal Institutions: Key Informant Interviews</i> .....	89
<b>6</b>	<b>Discussion</b> .....	<b>106</b>
6.1	<i>Sustainability Considerations in Tonga's Policy Planning Processes</i> .....	107
6.2	<i>Drivers of Change in Tonga</i> .....	108
6.3	<i>Factors for Institutionalizing SEA in Tonga</i> .....	114
6.4	<i>Recommendations</i> .....	120
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>127</b>
7.1	<i>Review of Research Objectives</i> .....	128
7.2	<i>Conclusion</i> .....	132
<b>8</b>	<b>References</b> .....	<b>133</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>148</b>

# List of Tables

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Table 1: Tiers of strategic actions and examples.....	31
Table 2: SEA Models .....	34
Table 3: List of SEA Studies conducted in Pacific Island Countries .....	44
Table 4: List of Documents Relevant to SDGs 13, 14, 15 in Tonga .....	72
Table 5: List of Key Informants Interviewed .....	75
Table 6: Sustainability evaluation criteria .....	76
Table 7: SEA Performance Criteria.....	77
Table 8: An Assessment of Tongan Policies and Plans Against SEA Performance Criteria..	87
Table 9: Problems faced when introducing new processes in Tongan policy planning.....	101

# List of Figures

---

Figure 1: Map of the Kingdom of Tonga .....	16
Figure 2: General SEA Process .....	32
Figure 3: Pillars of Sustainable Development Goals and SEA .....	51
Figure 4: Field work sites .....	73
Figure 5: Perception of Sustainable Development among Key Informants .....	90
Figure 6: Awareness of SDGs Among Key Informants .....	91
Figure 7: Public Involvement in PPP Processes .....	94
Figure 8: Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms for achieving SDGs .....	96
Figure 9: Awareness of SEA Among Key Informants .....	99
Figure 10: SEA Complementing Policy Planning Processes .....	121



# List of Abbreviations

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ADB	Asian Development Bank
EA	Environmental assessment
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
TFSP	Tonga Fisheries Sector Plan
JNAP II	Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management II
LDCs	Least developing countries
PPP	Policy, plan or programme
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SEA	Strategic environmental assessment
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SPREP	Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme
TASP	Tonga Agriculture Sector Plan
TFSP	Tonga Fisheries Sector Plan
TSDF II	Tonga Strategic Development Framework II
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WB	World Bank

# **1 Introduction**

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This chapter provides an overview of the research. Firstly, it discusses the problem that the research is focused on, the research question and objectives that this study seeks to achieve. Secondly, a brief description of the case study is offered for the study context. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the methodology and thesis structure to guide the reader.

## 1.1 Research rationale

In our developing world, governments shape the future of their nations by establishing policies, plans and programmes (PPPs) to guide development. PPPs form the foundations that determine decisions on investment in national development across many sectors such as land use, agriculture, energy and other fields vital for economic growth and development. The processes for developing PPPs involve a series of discussions with various stakeholders and many factors are considered throughout the formulation process (UNECE, 2016). Factors such as availability of resources, political support, cost and others are considered in planning. Given the substantial influences that PPPs have on future decisions that impose long term effects on populations, the environmental, social and economic implications of development plans must be thoroughly considered (UNECE, 2016). The environmental, economic and social dimensions in planning form the pillars for what is now largely accepted as the pathway for economic growth within environmental limits, a concept generally known as sustainable development. In order to help attain sustainable development, many countries employ a planning tool known as Strategic Environmental Assessment. SEA is a formalized, systematic process that integrates environmental considerations into decision making to achieve sustainable development (Sadler and Verheem, 1996). It also enables institutional change and transformative learning in support of sustainability and raises decision makers' awareness and understanding of environmental and sustainability issues (Runhaar and Driessen, 2007; Therivel, 2010).

Following the success of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in garnering collective global effort for sustainability, the United Nations in 2015 explicitly adopted a sustainability perspective in the new programme: “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals” (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs provide a platform for integration of environmental management and sustainability, and socio-economic agenda into country development plans, policies and programs (Biermann et al., 2017). As nations around the world make adjustments to accommodate and meet the 169 targets presented under 17 ambitious goals, an analysis tool is necessary to assess the policies, plans and programmes emerging from the SDG processes to determine their sustainability credentials. SEA seems fit for this purpose due to its nature and application at the PPP level (Partidario and Sheate, 2013; White and Noble, 2013; Polido, João and Ramos, 2018). Accordingly, research and discussions

on how SEA can be useful in achieving SDGs is now proceeding across the globe (Ezzat et al., 2017; Hacking, 2019; UNECE, 2017).

Following the paradigm of developed countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and others in Europe, the SEA process has also been introduced in developing countries to support decision-making processes in planning and to increase participatory and collaborative planning towards more sustainable pathways in development. As such, the role of SEA in achieving sustainability has been studied over the last three decades in both developed countries (Fischer, 2007; White and Noble, 2013; Partidario et al., 2008; Stinchcombe and Gibson, 2001) and developing countries in Asia, South Africa and others (Wirutskulshai et al., 2011; Liou & Yu, 2004; Retief, Jones, & Jay, 2008). A common theme arising from these studies is that the purpose and role of SEA should be context-specific and shaped according to the institutional, administrative, political and cultural context in which it is being applied. Many factors determine the suitability of institutionalizing SEA in planning, policy and programme processes across varying country contexts (Bidstrup & Hansen, 2014; Bina, 2008; Slunge & Tran, 2014; Wirutskulshai, Sajor, & Coowanitwong, 2011). This research considers the need for SEA in assisting the policy and planning processes in Tonga, a small developing nation in the South Pacific region, to meet SDG targets.

## 1.2 Problem statement

Many SEA experts agree that SEA can support sustainable development by integrating the sustainability concept throughout the decision-making process from principles to practice (Partidario and Clark, 2000; Stinchcombe and Gibson, 2001). However, it appears that practitioners and decision-makers face difficulties in translating broad sustainability principles to specific criteria for practice due to poor understanding of how to apply sustainability to the SEA process (Stinchcombe and Gibson, 2001). This SEA obstacle is echoed by White and Noble (2013) who conducted a review of the SEA-sustainability relationship over a ten-year period of academic research. The review identified many underlying barriers that challenge SEA for achieving sustainable development. Some of the barriers include; 1) the variable interpretations of the scope of sustainability in SEA; 2) the limited use of assessment criteria linked to sustainability objectives; 3) challenges for decision-makers in operationalizing sustainability in SEA and; 4) adapting PPP development decision-making processes to include sustainability issues. To advance SEA for sustainability, White and Noble (2013) highlight the

need to better define the scope of sustainability in SEA; elucidate how to operationalize the various approaches to sustainability in SEA, rather than just describing the approaches; provide guidance on how to operationalize broad sustainability goals through assessment criteria in SEA; and understand better how to facilitate institutional learning regarding sustainability through SEA application.

According to Alshuwaikhat, (2005) and Polido et al., (2014), a clear understanding of SEA and sustainability concepts among government, academics and practitioners is especially critical for small islands. This is because the sustainability concepts in these territories are distinctive and demand tailored perspectives and approaches to support sustainable development (van der Velde et al., 2007). Pacific Island countries (PICs) are categorized as small and remote developing island nations with limited natural resources. Their small land masses often scattered across vast ocean spaces pose developmental challenges, exacerbated by growing populations exerting pressure on degrading resources (Roberts, Wright, & O'Neill, 2007). Given the need to develop within their confined resource limits, sustainability goals are vital for their survival and are at the forefront of most development plans, policies and programmes. The Agenda 2030 or the sustainable development goals are opportune and provide a useful reference point to measure sustainable development progress not only in Pacific Island countries but also in other regions throughout the globe. As such, the role of SEA in helping countries achieve SDGs has been suggested by a number of SEA scholars around the globe (Ezzat et al., 2017; Hacking, 2019; Saxena et al., 2016). In this context, the role that SEA can play in advancing the sustainability agenda for achieving the SDGs is warranted for Pacific island countries.

There is a lack of research and guidance that illustrates how to select an approach that is most appropriate for introducing the SEA process in small developing nations (Polido et al., 2018; Alshuwaikhat, 2005). According to Polido et al., (2014), more research focused on SEA in small islands is needed to identify areas for SEA capacity-building and improvement. This will require a study of institutional settings in order to design country-specific formal procedures for SEA adoption and practice. PICs have yet to formally adopt the SEA process, however, there have been a few SEA studies conducted in the Pacific by Morgan and Onorio, (1996) in Tonga and Levett and McNally, (2003) in Fiji. These studies were initiated and supported by development partners with views to promote the wider use of SEA in planning and policy development processes. However, the poor uptake of SEA in the Pacific region

(Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005) indicates that there are possible barriers and factors that have impeded its institutionalization in PICs. Accordingly, the Pacific context is yet to be fully understood in regard to SEA knowledge and its potential in assisting planning processes for sustainable development. Using Tonga as a case study, this research aims to elucidate these barriers in order to determine the need for SEA in Pacific Island Countries who possess similar characteristics of small islands studied by Polido et al., (2014).

### 1.3 Research question

A dearth of SEA research in the context of small islands is acknowledged in the SEA literature (see Polido et al., 2014). The launch of the Agenda 2030 SDGs is opportune, given the strong recognition of PICs including Tonga for the need to sustainably manage their natural resources (Hiruy and Eversole, 2019). The research question, therefore is: ***“Is there a role for SEA to improve current planning and policy making processes towards achieving SDGs in Tonga?”*** Accordingly, an understanding of current policy and planning processes in relation to achieving the SDGs focussed on environmental management: SDG 13 – climate action; SDG14 – Life under water and; SDG 15 – Life on land is necessary to determine the need for SEA to guide the planning processes in PICs for sustainable development.

### 1.4 Research objectives

In order to investigate the sustainability aspects of planning processes in relation to implementation and practice in Tonga, the following objectives are envisaged to provide guidance for the research:

- 1 To evaluate the potential of SEA to facilitate good governance and transformational change to alleviate current problems in PPP processes
- 2 To determine the level of sustainability considerations in Tonga’s planning, policy and programme development processes in order to identify current problems in relation to achieving SDG targets.
- 3 To identify the factors that may influence the uptake of SEA in Tonga and evaluate the barriers that may affect its institutionalization.
- 4 To recommend practical conditions and requirements for the uptake of SEA in Tonga.

## 1.5 Research scope

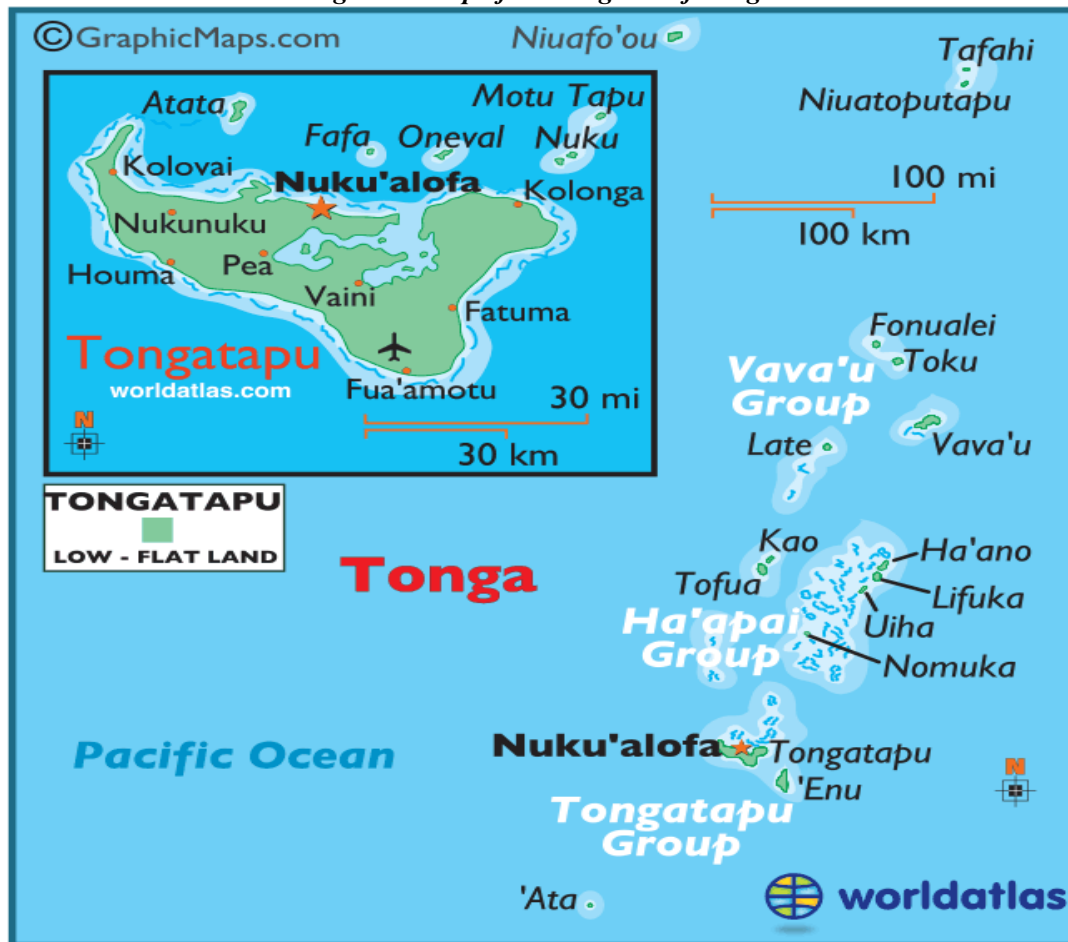
The Kingdom of Tonga was the most logical choice for this study, as the researcher is a recipient of the Regional Development New Zealand Aid Scholarships from Tonga and intends to return to Tonga to apply the knowledge gained from this research to help improve its economic development. Accordingly, this research will focus on the extent in which SDGs 13, 14 and 15 are integrated in to the three tiers of the planning in Tonga (1. Policy - national policies and strategic development level; 2) Plan - overarching action plans and; 3) Programme - sector plan). These SDGs contribute directly to natural resource management in Tonga and involve the close collaboration of a number of sectors and agencies responsible for environmental management. While there is some research on SEA application at the programme level (e.g biodiversity, coastal management etc ), there is a dearth of SEA research that looks at national policy planning processes at the policy and planning levels. This research will focus on assessing the current policy and planning processes in Tonga for achieving the SDGs to evaluate the potential of SEA in guiding their policy and national planning processes to inform the programme levels with the ultimate goal of achieving the SDGs. Specifically, the interrelations of these SDGs across the tiers of policy and planning are assessed to determine if SEA can help to identify synergies and trade-offs to expedite achieving SDGs.

## 1.6 The Kingdom of Tonga

The Kingdom of Tonga is a Polynesian sovereign state with a land area of about 750 square kilometres and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of about 700,000 square kilometres. There are three main island groups in Tonga dispersed over 500 km (Figure 1): Tongatapu, the southern-most island group with a population of 74,679; Ha'apai, a central archipelago of 62 mainly coralline islands (population, 6,144); and Vava'u, the northern group of raised coral islands with high tourist potential (population, 13,740). Two small seamount islands – the Niuas - lie a further 220km to the north (population, 1,232). According to the latest population census in 2016, the population of Tonga now stands at 100, 745. Tonga is facing a number of socio-economic and environmental challenges. The growth in urbanization, being the result of rural migration from both the outer islands and Tongatapu itself, has placed increasing demands on the nation's natural resources particularly around the capital Nuku'alofa, where an estimated forty percent of the country's population resides. In contrast, about 60 percent of Tonga's

population lives in rural areas, with agriculture and fisheries as the main source of livelihoods.

*Figure 1: Map of the Kingdom of Tonga*



*Source: World atlas, 2017*

Tonga has one of the highest rates of subsistence food production amongst Pacific Island Countries. This is largely based on traditional production of root crops, which provide food security, employment and income for many households. Despite this underlying resilience, there are a number of factors which are increasing the vulnerability of the agricultural and fisheries sector. Due to its low topographic position, many of Tonga's islands are prone to natural hazards such as cyclones, sea level rise, earthquakes and volcanic activity. This renders Tonga vulnerable in terms of economic development, food security and resource management. Tonga's economy is highly dependent on agriculture, and fisheries and tourism. Rural communities are particularly dependent on agriculture and fisheries and many are highly vulnerable to extreme weather events. Tonga and its fishing communities are also on the front line of climate change - threatened by erratic rainfall, extreme weather events, sea-level rise,



and loss of coral reefs from rising oceans temperatures, ocean acidification and local environmental degradation (TFSP, 2016).

### **National development plans and policies**

Much of the governance, planning, policy making and decision making is coordinated and managed by the government, the crown and legislative assembly based in the capital, Nuku'alofa. The Tonga strategic development framework II 2015–2025 (TSDF II) provides the guiding principles and directions for sustainable development over a ten- year period. Sector plans, ministry corporate plans and annual management plans detail actions to deliver these strategies through their respective budget allocations. In Tonga, there is no stand-alone policy on environmental management. Policies are fragmented amongst different sectors for coordinating implementation and reporting. This includes the national biodiversity action plan, waste management strategy, land use policy, forest management policy, an energy roadmap, environmental impact assessment (EIA) process and a consolidated climate change adaptation and disaster management initiative under the Joint National Action Plan for climate change and disaster risk management.

Environmental management is a complex task, involving many organisations and individuals, and requires coordination from the national to sectoral and community levels. The Government recognises that better coordination and cooperation with the private sector including small businesses and the village communities is needed to achieve its aspiration of a sustainable, competitive and fair economy, government and society. This is especially critical for achieving ecological sustainable development to support economic growth. This entails holistic approaches to addressing the land, coastal and marine environment development as a whole system rather than assessing them in parts or sectors. Accordingly, the holistic and inclusive approaches in which policy planning and programming is developed is important as it would determine how well the later stages of the PPPs perform, particularly in implementation phases. A study of the current policy and planning development processes in relation to these aspects of good planning is therefore necessary, to establish the current planning models in Tonga and determine if there is a role for SEA to improve the policy planning process for achieving the SDGs.

## 1.7 Methodology

This study is based on the concepts of sustainable development and SEA theory. It also draws on institutional theory to provide an understanding of the policy planning processes and paradigm in the Tongan context. Understanding the interplays within and between the formal and informal institutions helps to elucidate the factors that may influence the uptake of SEA in Tonga that may also be relevant to other Pacific Island countries. The study comprises three components. Firstly, a literature review of the concept of sustainable development, its principles and how it has advanced from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs is conducted. This is followed by an examination of the evolution, purpose and benefits of SEA in developing countries context to ascertain the potential of SEA to assist in integrating sustainability principles into Tonga's national policy, planning and programme development processes. Secondly, a document analysis involving the review of current policy planning documents and institutional settings in which decisions are made towards meeting SDGs targets in Tonga is also conducted. This involves the use of an evaluation criteria to assess policies, plans and programmes pertaining to resource management to enable understanding of the integration pathway of SDGs. This will determine the extent in which sustainability considerations are embedded across all tiers of policy planning processes. This step is the precursor to identifying the practical problems faced in each stage of the PPP development process and challenges for meeting the SDGs. Finally, key informant interviews with decision-makers and senior officers involved in policy planning and decision making processes across all tiers of planning and decision making are carried out to complement document analysis and obtain information about institutional contexts that could not be derived from the document analysis process. The data is then analysed to determine where SEA may be able to assist in alleviating the problems in managing natural resources and therefore assist in guiding development in alignment with the SDG targets. Other specific methods and approaches utilized in the research are:

### 4.1 Evaluation of Sustainability Credentials of PPPs in Tonga

A number of Tongan policy and planning documents are analysed for their sustainability credentials using a Sustainability Criteria. The recognition of sustainability including the degree of coordination among stakeholders, participatory approaches, environmental, economic and social considerations are some of the criteria used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current PPP development processes.

#### **4.2 Evaluation of PPPs against SEA Performance Criteria**

The PPPs are then analysed against a simplified SEA Performance criteria adapted from IAIA 2002. This is a crucial component of the method in determining the potential role of SEA for PPP development processes in Tonga.

#### **4.3 Key Informant Interviews**

The key informants interviews with planners and decision makers are of a semi-structured form, taking up to 40minutes with each participant. The discussions in the interviews are framed around the participants' understanding of SDGs, the perceptions of development problems pertaining to policy, planning development processes and suggestions for improving such processes.

### **1.8 Thesis structure**

The next two chapters describe the theoretical perspectives which will be applied extensively throughout this study. Chapter 2 derives concepts from sustainable development and the nature and evolution of SEA theory in relation to its role for advancing the sustainability agenda. SEA benefits and factors for effective SEA practice are identified to formulate the basis on which to evaluate the policies, plans and programmes for their sustainability credentials. Chapter three is a preliminary assessment of the policy and planning processes in Tonga in relation to MDGs and SDGs. The chapter describes Tonga's strategic development framework and the policy planning processes for meeting their commitments for sustainable development under the SDGs. It also draws on institutional theory to evaluate the formal and informal institutions in Tonga which influences environmental management and decision making in respect to policy planning and implementation. The chapter highlights the role of culture among other institutional constraints which affects effective administration of impact assessment tools in response to managing the impacts of increasing economic development pressures on the natural resources in Tonga. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the research strategy and methods and the rationale behind the selected methods used to obtain the data for the study. Methodological challenges are also discussed and addressed.

Chapter 5 examines the results of this study. The results are categorised under formal institutions (legislative framework, governance structures, policy and planning documents) and

the informal institutions (norms, cultural practices, traditions) and identifies their role in decision making and the policy planning development processes. The analysis of the formal institutions comprised two stages. The first involved an analysis of government policies, plans and programmes and relevant legislation pertaining to three selected targets relevant to ecosystem management under three SDGs, 13, 14 and 15. This was the first step to understanding the institutional arrangements, tiering and coordination among Ministries and all stakeholders involved in policy planning processes for SDGs and their implementation. The second stage involved the analysis of the gaps, ambiguity and problems identified in the first stage of the analysis against a simplified generic SEA Performance criteria adapted from the IAIA 2002. The evaluation of the informal institutions involved an analysis of the key informant interviews to identify the problems in current policy planning processes and elucidate the mismatch between what is stipulated in policy and what takes place in practice. Chapter six elaborates on the findings of this study in relation to the theoretical perspectives of chapter two and chapter three. It describes the factors that may influence the institutionalization of SEA in Tonga. Finally, a synthesis of the evaluations conducted in preceding chapters and the overall summary, recommendations and conclusions of this research are provided in chapter seven.

## **2 SEA and the Sustainable Development Goals: Theoretical Perspectives**

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This chapter draws on the concepts of sustainable development and strategic environmental assessment. The first section discusses the origins of sustainability and how it has evolved and influenced global development in the new paradigm under Agenda 2030: Sustainable Development Goals. The global debates on the SDGs are highlighted to illustrate the need for mechanisms to address the synergies and trade—offs that come with global development agendas. The second section introduces the concept of strategic environmental assessment theory and developments in practice in developing nations. The benefits and challenges of SEA practice provides insight on the factors that may influence the uptake of SEA in Tonga and other Pacific Island Countries.

## 2.1 Introduction

Sustainability originates from the concept of sustainable development, a concept that gained global prominence since its inception at the World's first Earth Summit in Rio, 1992. In its factual origins, sustainability means a capacity to maintain some entity, outcome, or process over time (Kalsi, 2015). In more general terms, Hamblin (1991) described sustainability as the ability of a system to maintain its productivity with little or no net decline over many decades, even if subjected to stress or perturbation. James et al., (2013) describe sustainability as the endurance of systems and processes. In an Australian adaptation of the concept, 'ecologically sustainable development' was described by the Commonwealth Government as *"development that improves the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends"* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994: 2). While there are many varied definitions of sustainable development, the concept stresses the importance of inclusiveness in order to strike the balance between economic development and protecting our natural resources. Sustainability calls for more inclusive and innovative approaches for economic development without further perturbation on our natural environment, and where possible, enhance the long-term productivity of ecosystems. Once we acknowledge that our environment has ecological limits, we can then understand the pressures and interconnections within the ecosystems. Ultimately, this brings focus on the societies and various groups of people who all contribute in one way or another to the degradation or recovery of our planet. Consequently, the problems and solutions can be discovered through in-depth analysis and examination of the interconnections between humans and their environment.

## 2.2 Sustainable development: global perspective

Sustainable development attracted global attention from the document "Our Common Future" also known as the Brundtland report in 1987. Despite its intended benefits on highlighting the need for balance in meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the generations to come, the anticipated outcomes have appeared to be inscrutable due to the vagueness of the concept itself (Dovers & Handmer, 1993). The lack of universal understanding of sustainable development, lack of clear mechanisms to support sustainable development, and countries' varying stages of development have added to the discourse of the term (Barbier, 1987). In particular, developing countries have found it difficult to achieve

sustainable development due to the complexity and ambiguity of the concept among policy makers, decision-makers, economists and the people in general. In recognition of the challenges of sustainable development, the United Nations (UN) and member countries met at the first Earth Summit also known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio De Janeiro in 1992. The meeting highlighted many sustainability issues including intergenerational and intra-generational discourses. In particular, the question on ecological limits and determining how resources should be saved today for the future generations and what can be done globally to replenish threatened resources became pivotal. The Summit created a platform for least developing countries (LDCs) to express their challenges for attaining sustainability and provided opportunities for richer member states to recognize the challenges for obtaining global development. Consequently, the Earth Summit resulted in key initiatives such as Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, Forest Principles, Convention on Biodiversity, Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. These conventions were steppingstones to the Millennium Declaration that provided the basis for the global framework known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### **From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals**

The MDGs endorsed in the year 2000 comprised eight goals ranging from eradicating extreme hunger to reducing child mortality and ensuring environmental sustainability. The MDGs had a target date of achieving the goals by 2015, agreed globally by all UN member states and development partners. At the end of 2015, the UN released the MDG report that revealed the progress of MDGs for achieving the 21 targets and 60 indicators using 1990 as the baseline. According to the MDG Report 2015, MDGs achieved momentous benefits across all 8 goals. One of the key milestones achieved for Goal 7 which focused on environmental sustainability included the success story of the Ozone Layer recovery as a result of global efforts towards eliminating ozone-depleting substances. This milestone was achieved under Target 7A to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources. Despite such milestones however, significant gaps were also identified in the report. The UN Secretary General at the time, Ban Ki-moon, in his foreword acknowledged persisting inequalities and uneven progress in meeting the goals. In particular, the countries in some parts of Africa that were still living in

poverty and still challenged with water scarcity problems. These gaps or “unfinished business” of the MDGs provided the basis on which to continue the success from the global action leading towards the new development agenda; the Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030.

## 2.3 Sustainable Development Goals

One of the main outcomes of the MDGs was the recognition of the importance of integrating the environment as a core pillar into the development ambitions of the post-2015 successor agenda. The MDGs 2015 report emphasized that environmental sustainability is key to long term socio-economic development and poverty eradication. Given the persistent environmental challenges plaguing our world such as waste control, food and water security etc, strengthening natural systems and ensuring ecosystem health is critical to overcoming such challenges. The greater understanding of the role of environmental sustainability was thus highlighted and gained traction as a result of the process and lessons learned from the MDGs 2015 Agenda. Hence, the MDGs were instrumental in influencing the environmental focus of the new post-2015 Agenda better known as Agenda 2030 or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs are an all-inclusive set of 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators encompassing a multitude of economic, social and environmental objectives to be achieved by 2030 (Hacking, 2019). SDGs are increasingly being accepted globally as the common language on social, environmental and economic issues which can help improve communication, coordination and collaboration between government, society and business (CISL 2017, pg7). As nations around the world increase their commitment to incorporate these global SDGs into their national policies, plans and programmes, it seems logical to review the sustainability credentials of PPPs and evaluate the areas which may need more effort, resources and adjustments to meet the SDGs. A good starting point is to review the processes in which sustainability is embedded into PPPs in order to determine the right tools and mechanisms to reach these targets. Accordingly, transformational change in the way PPPs are made is key towards achieving SDGs at the national levels and pave the way for a more sustainable future (Moyer & Bohl, 2019).



### 2.3.1 Synergies and trade-offs

Upon closer examination of the practical achievement of SDGs at the national level, a number of challenges emerge. Firstly, SDGs cannot always be achieved equally or simultaneously. Achieving one goal may have negative or positive implications for achieving another goal and therefore, trade-offs and synergies must be considered and identified when assessing national efforts to achieving the goals (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017; Hacking, 2019). For example, meeting renewable energy generation targets under SDG 7 through biomass and solar farms may have negative implications on food production (SDG 2) through agriculture and pose a threat to sustainable land use (SDG 15) if these targets compete for land and water resources (ICSU, 2017). Agricultural practices (SDG 2) utilise freshwater resources that may compromise drinking water sources (SDG 6) and thus may require trade-off considerations. Other goals have synergistic effects, such as sustainable food production (SDG 2) can help alleviate poverty (SDG 1) and support good health (SDG3). The interconnections of SDGs should therefore be understood in order to integrate efforts and avoid “selective attention” that may undermine the achievement of other goals.

According to Bond et al., (2012), more often than not, the bio-physical environment typically gets traded off for socio-economic benefit when decisions are made “behind closed doors”. They argue that in order for sustainability to be achieved, decision making processes must undergo robust accountability checks involving transparency and inclusiveness of all stakeholders which are intrinsic to achieving SDGs. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also recognizes the danger of trading off natural resources for economic benefit. To counter this challenge in development, many international development organisations promote the use of impact assessment tools such environmental impact assessment (EIA), applied at project level and strategic environmental assessment (SEA), targeted at the earliest decision making level at the policy, planning and programme development stage. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) promotes SEA as an appropriate tool to evaluate trade-offs and how to gain a balance between various objectives due to its application across many sectors (ADB 2012a). In addition, the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also encourage the use of SEA to promote the sustainability agenda in the rapid economic development of countries across the globe.

### 2.3.2 How to achieve SDGs?

The United Nations has delegated the mandate for achieving SDGs to the country level. Governments are responsible for integrating these SDGs into their national PPPs and progress is tracked annually through voluntary national review (VNR) reports which are presented by government leaders at the high-level meeting of the United Nation's member countries. The technical capacities, political willingness and financial capabilities of governments in developing nations are key factors that determine how these SDGs will be achieved. These factors must also be considered when introducing new tools to assist governments in incorporating SDGs into their national PPPs.

Despite the availability of tools and processes to incorporate sustainability principles in PPPs (e.g Sustainability assessment, SEA etc ), the SDGs must be examined more closely to evaluate which process would best fit their purpose for inclusiveness to achieve them. Many researchers have analysed the SDGs and identified precautions for achieving these goals globally, regionally and more importantly at the national levels in which they are being implemented. According to Sebestyen et al., (2019), achieving the SDGs requires integrated effort and action across the environmental, social and economic platforms due to the strong interrelation of the SDGs. They argue that understanding the relationships of SDGs is vital to formulating, amending and preparing appropriate and efficient policies to achieve them. Scherer et al., (2018) also accentuate that interactions among SDGs must be well understood to develop effective and integrative policies that will differ strongly across geographical locations taking into account the various environmental, financial, cultural, and economic conditions.

Moyer and Bohl, (2019) studied the trade-offs and synergies in achieving the SDGs across alternative policy pathways: technology, lifestyle change and decentralized governance. They found that the geographical level of analyzing the achievement of SDGs matters significantly. Specifically, they highlight that although the SDGs appear achievable globally, based on using richer and more developed countries progress as benchmarks, when assessed at the national level, poor countries cannot achieve SDG targets by 2050, let alone 2030. Hence, they argue that more attention should be focused on small developing nations in order to steer the earth's course towards sustainably improving human development across the globe. Accordingly, understanding institutions is key to preparing countries to adopt new tools for achieving SDGs. This research aims to enhance knowledge of institutional processes in small

developing nations, specifically, Tonga, belonging to a cluster of nations in the Pacific Islands region and their current policy planning processes for achieving SDGs in order to determine the appropriate process to assist in their efforts to meeting SDG targets.

### **2.3.3 Integrating sustainability into policies, plans and programmes**

There are a number of processes that support decision making and aligning PPPs to help achieve sustainable development: 1) sustainability appraisal (SA), is a process that directs decision-making towards broad sustainability that encompasses a vast range of decision making from individual choices through to the higher levels of decision making in the policy, plan and programmes levels (Pope et al., 2017; Dalal Clayton and Sadler, 2014); 2) Sustainability impact assessment (SIA) is concerned with responding to the real challenges of achieving sustainable development through transformation rather than mitigating damage. SIA focuses on development design that ensures the delivery of lasting contributions that is fairly distributed and avoids persistent damage (Bond et al., 2013) and; 3) Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is a systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed policy, plan or programme initiatives in order to ensure they are fully included and appropriately addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision-making on par with economic and social considerations (Partidario and Clark, 2000). SA and SIA are recent processes that have evolved and branched out of the SEA process, with similar objectives to integrate sustainability in PPP processes but have different focus. Therefore, these processes each have the potential to address the interconnections of SDGs and identify the challenges pertaining to synergies and trade-offs between the goals (Arts et al., 2011; Hacking, 2019; Moyer and Bohl, 2019). However, given that SEA is more widely practiced than these new branches of impact assessment used that are used mostly in developed countries, this research will focus only on the SEA process to evaluate its potential to achieve SDGs in Tonga.

## **2.4 Strategic Environmental Assessment Theory**

### **2.4.1 Strategic environmental assessment origins**

The concept of SEA stems from the notion of environmental impact assessment (EIA) which was first introduced in the United States in 1969 under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The purpose of EIA was to address the environmental and social problems

that emerged from extensive infrastructural development (Morgan, 1998). Development projects caused environmental problems such as air pollution, loss of biodiversity, water pollution and others. Social problems developed due to conflicts over resource and land ownership and deteriorating health conditions linked to environmental degradation. However, soon after NEPA came into force, the limitations of EIA became apparent. Applied at the project level of development, it was realized that environmental and social concerns were considered too late into the decision-making process. Specifically, since EIA was applied to individual development proposals on a case by case basis, the cumulative impacts of major projects across programme sectoral development were poorly addressed (Lee and Walsh, 1992; Therivel *et al.*, 1992; Polido *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, valuable time and resources in development projects were spent on mitigating negative environmental and social impacts that could have been avoided if they had been detected earlier in the policy and planning stage. This recognition saw the need for environmental and social considerations to be integrated earlier in decision making at the PPP level and thus the concept of strategic environmental assessment SEA was born in the 1980s. In essence, SEA was designed to address the environmental implications of a new policy, plan or programme on other PPPs and is therefore able to identify potential cumulative impacts that may have irreversible consequences in the project implementation phase (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005, Fischer, 2002; Gunn and Noble, 2009).

### 2.4.2 SEA evolution

The plethora of SEA definitions in the literature demonstrates the evolving nature of the process when its adoption expanded across different geographical locations. Originating in USA, Canada and other developed countries in Europe in the 1980s, the SEA process gained traction in developing countries in the early 1990s and 2000s (see (Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Liou & Yu, 2004; Retief, 2007; Slunge & Tran, 2014). The conceptual evolution of SEA is described by Bina (2008), Jiliberto, (2011), Slunge *et al.*, 2009 and a useful summary of SEA definitions is provided by Silva *et al.*, 2014. The evolution of SEA can be described in the following 4 phases:

**Phase 1:** In the 1980s, the initial phase of the concept of SEA was to address the shortcomings of EIA with the assumption that if environmental intervention was applied earlier in the decision-making processes i.e the PPP levels, many of the problems in the project EIA phase would be avoided. As such, this type of SEA was known as ‘EIA-driven’ and

‘effects-based’ (Sadler, 2005) and was commonly known as the EIA of PPPs (Fisher, 2007) as the technical aspects of the tool were most emphasized in this early phase. Accordingly, the tool was implemented in the manner of EIA and took the form of a technical report that contained the prediction of the positive and negative impacts of a PPP and the mitigation measures and recommendations to avoid such problems. Mechanisms to monitor the PPP during the implementation phases were also part of the SEA report. In this sense, SEA was an informational and decision support tool that enabled decision makers to make more informed decisions on environmental matters concerning the PPP.

**Phase 2:** Progressing in the early 1990s, the SEA process assumed a more proactive role that aimed to incorporate environmental and sustainability considerations to the processes of PPP development (Bina, 2008). This approach is known as ‘objectives-led’ or ‘decision-centred’ and took a more interactive role in the decision-making processes of the PPPs rather than just evaluating its effects. Accordingly, the participatory role of SEA gained prominence in this phase as the issues of sustainability also increased after the release of the Brundtland report in 1987 (Hamblin, 1992). The focus of SEA thus shifted from the consequences and effects of PPPs to implications and considerations of PPPs and focused on its role in achieving and advancing the sustainability agenda. This gave rise to many arguments in the literature on whether SEA should maintain an environmental focus (Lee and Walsh, 1992) or assume the role of sustainability, looking at wider concerns on the social and economic implications of PPPs (Abaza et al., 2004; Brifet et al., 2003; Sadler and Verheem, 1996). According to Abaza et al., (2004), employing the sustainability perspectives (i.e include social and economic considerations) in SEA supports a more holistic view of the interconnections among the major drivers of change. The benefits of this include political favour as decision makers are made aware of environmental impacts alongside the social and economic aspects of decision making which are often present in economic and financial analysis reports. However, many SEA scholars caution that over time this could result in the dilution of the environmental focus of the process when pressures already exist to trade-off environmental for economic benefits (Bond et al., 2012). As such, SEA should maintain its environmental sustainability focus with the notion of promoting environmental protection as its primary value with the view that over time, this would transform decision-making processes to be more environmentally conscious (Wood 2003).

**Phase 3:** From the late 1990s to the new millennium, other limitations of SEA emerged. In particular, the reliance on scientific advice and neutral, unbiased information to influence decision making in the SEA process did not take into account other important factors such as power relations, cultural context, social structures, conflicts and other dynamics interplaying within the institutions (Bina, 2007). With this realization, Bina (2008) asserts that SEA must move from the technical and scientific focus to good governance of institutions and organizations and promote social and political learning. Jiliberto (2011) also emphasizes the importance of good governance through dialogue, negotiation, cooperation, and recommends a shift from bureaucratic rationality to purposeful rationality in decision making. In order to facilitate this new meaning of SEA, the understanding of the decision-making context, within which SEA is to be implemented, must first be understood in order for SEA to exert some influence on the outcome of the decisions and PPPs. The focus of SEA on achieving sustainable development must also be understood within the country or context in which SEA is being applied. Without understanding what sustainable development or SDGs mean to the people of the country in which SEA is being introduced, the effectiveness of the SEA process would be miniscule. Similarly, without understanding the political, social and cultural factors of decision making, SEA cannot influence it (Bina, 2008).

**Phase 4** Over the last decade, the concept of Institutional-centered SEA (I-SEA) gained prominence (Slunge et al., 2009). Specifically, the realization that SEA could not live up to its original purpose as a technical instrument to provide decision-makers with reliable information to make more informed decisions gave rise to this new branch of SEA. Generally, PPP approaches and decision-making lack scientific rigor and stability particularly in developing countries with limited technical capacities. The PPP processes are constantly influenced by uncertainty, conflict and ambiguity from a variety of factors such as culture, political statutes, social hierarchy etc. Consequently, SEA became adapted to become more proactive in its role as a “catalyst” that drives PPP formulations and thus contribute to efficiency, legitimacy and general quality in decision-making (Lobos and Partidario, 2014). The main assumption behind I-SEA approach is that in order for SEA to be effective at the PPP level, it should be focused on assessing institutions and governance systems that elicit environmental and social management rather than on predicting the environmental, social and economic impacts of alternative PPP actions (Mulder, 2011).

In summary, as the concept of SEA evolved, it reprised other considerations pertaining to the need for good governance and sustainable development in decision making (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005, Fischer, 2003, Polido et al., 2016b). Specifically, the importance of the sustainability agenda in environmental assessment became more prominent. Hence, in addition to addressing cumulative impacts and avoiding problems in project level EIA, the sustainability aspects of development such as social, health, cultural and economic implications also became part of the evolving SEA process (Arts and Van Lamoan, 2005; Bina, 2008; Boyle, 1998; Liou et al., 2006). Evidently, the developers of SEA have consistently improved and adapted the process to not only address the shortcomings of EIA but also to refine its role in supporting decision making processes for sustainable development. SEA is internationally promoted as process that supports decision making by considering the environmental and sustainability implications of PPPs in a more proactive, coherent and remedial way in order to avoid problems in meeting the sustainability objectives of such PPPs.

### 2.4.3 Applying SEA into policies, plans and programmes

In order to appreciate the value and ‘work’ of SEA, it is worth understanding the areas or strategic actions in which they are to be used. Strategic actions are commonly referred to as policies, plans and programmes which are often regarded as the 3 main tiers or levels of decision making provides a clear distinction of what each level seeks to achieve. Table 1 describes each tier of strategic action and provides an example in Tongan institution.

*Table 1: Tiers of strategic actions and examples*

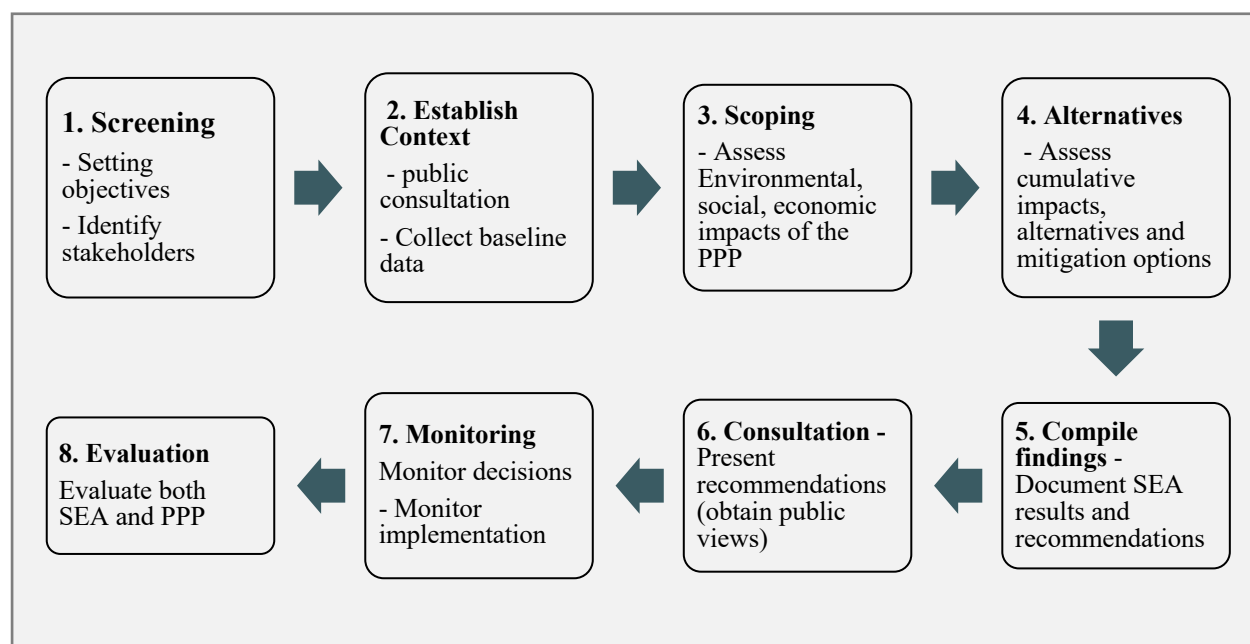
Strategic Action	Definition	Example in Tongan Institutions
<i>Policy</i>	is a guiding intent, with defined goals, objectives and priorities, and an actual or proposed direction.	- Tonga Strategic Development Framework II, Climate Change Policy
<i>Plan</i>	is a strategy or a design to carry out a general or particular course of action, incorporating policy ends, options and ways and means to implement them.	Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (JNAP), Tonga Fisheries Sector Plan
<i>Programme</i>	is a schedule of proposed commitments, activities, or instruments to be implemented within or by a particular sector or area of policy.	Environmental Programmes in the Ministry Corporate Plans

*Source: Adapted from Wood and Dejeddour, (1992)*

## 2.4.4 SEA process and models

In order to assess the potential of SEA in PICs, the various approaches and models for its application must be examined. A generic SEA process is illustrated in figure 2 to show the systematic process in which SEA operates as a systematic process that helps to ensure sustainability considerations are embedded in policy and planning processes.

*Figure 2: General SEA Process*



*Source: Adapted from Dalal Clayton and Sadler, 2006; Partidario 2000*

The general process of SEA comprises 8 stages which can be integrated into policy, planning development processes in Tonga for SDGs:

1. Screening to determine if SEA is required for the policy, plan or programme.
2. Establishing SEA context – identify policy objectives tied to national development framework involving key stakeholders
3. Scoping – identify focus and extent of SEA involving key stakeholders
4. Identify alternatives to meeting policy objectives and analyse cumulative impacts, trade-offs, synergies of each alternative – assess the environmental, social, economic implications of PPP on other SDGs involving key stakeholders
5. Compile findings, results and recommendations
6. Inform decision makers- present findings to public to choose best option



7. Monitor decisions and implementation
8. Evaluate outcomes to inform next PPP review

The stages are applied variably into the policy, planning development stage and SEA models have been developed to suit the planning contexts in which they are applied.

### *SEA models*

A number of SEA models have been developed to guide the application of SEA process into planning and decision making processes (table 2). The decision on which model will be most suitable for Tonga hinges on understanding decision making and policy and planning processes to understand the best approach to take. Formal legislative requirements, SEA guidelines and political commitment may also need to be considered to evaluate the necessary resources to support its implementation (*Wilson et al.*, 2011). Table 2 illustrates 4 models of SEA, of which some may need more resources than others to be adopted into national policy planning practice. For instance, the EIA-based model would involve the recruitment of an SEA consultant to conduct the study as a separate process which may require more time and resources to complete, before they can inform decisions for policies and plans. The dual track and incremental models need less time to complete as SEA is applied as part of the plan setting process, however, would still require the engagement of environmental practitioners. The decision-centred model fits into the planning process and informs decisions at critical stages of decision making with minimum legislative requirements. This model looks ideal but is still an emerging concept and examples on how this model being applied in other geographical contexts is needed. Deciding on which model to use is crucial to determine the effective institutionalization of SEA.

Moreover, SEA may be applied in a non-mandatory context. For example, McGimpsey and Morgan (2013) studied regional transport planning in New Zealand to determine if the existing PPP formulation process could be enhanced by SEA process. They found that the environmental scope in planning and policy development is consistent with the SEA scope of sustainability including economic, social and cultural aspects. SEA was thus not required as a separate process but rather as a “refining tool” to ensure that sustainable development is achieved. As such, they concluded that SEA concepts can enhance sustainability considerations within the various stages of development, without formal SEA legislative requirements. They stress however, that it would depend on country context, policy, planning, programme structures, decision making processes and institutional capacities.

Table 2: SEA Models

SEA Models	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>1. EIA-based</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Follows a similar process employed in EIA project level where a consultant(s) is hired to conduct SEA study on a PPP. Applied mostly at the levels of programmes and plans. Example, Strategic Environmental Assessment on Neiafu Master Plan, Tonga</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stages are clearly defined with little flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not flexible</li> <li>- Integration into decision-making processes not clear</li> <li>- Limited added value to decision-making process</li> <li>- Little strategic focus</li> </ul>
<i>2. Dual track</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SEA runs in parallel but independently from planning and policy making. Most commonly applied in the UK where the planning process is well structured with a strong environmental component</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Procedures for SEA are clearly defined</li> <li>- Alignment with well- structured planning process may enable successful outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full dynamics of planning may be obscured if planning process is not well structured</li> <li>- Integration into decision making process is vital but not clearly defined</li> <li>- SEA is not fully integrated into decision making process</li> </ul>
<i>3. Integrated (Incremental) model</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SEA is undertaken as an integral part of a comprehensive policy and plan setting process. It involves combining environmental assessment and planning procedures. Most commonly applied in New Zealand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Allows flexibility, no defined procedures</li> <li>- Minimizes requirements for additional human and financial resources, hence more cost-effective than conducting SEA as a separate process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effectiveness of SEA is not clear as there is no distinction between SEA and plan/policy setting process. SEA reporting is also not required</li> </ul>
<i>4. Decision-centred</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SEA adapted to planning and policy making process focusing on decision making process. Applied mostly in Canada, South Africa ,Portugal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Allows flexibility as the SEA process is adapted to the particularities of the decision-making system in the country or sector</li> <li>- Reports findings at critical stages of decision making</li> <li>- Minimum legislative requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Still an emerging concept</li> </ul>

Source: Partidario, 2003a, b; Chaker et al., 2006

## **2.5 SEA and sustainable development**

SEA has become widely recognized by governments and development stakeholders worldwide as a valuable component for sustainable development (Noble, 2002). Traditionally, the SEA process has been employed extensively by governments of developed nations who have resources and capacities to use the tool in the sectors that contribute to economic development (Acharibasam & Noble, 2014; Fischer, 2010). The need for SEA application varies across countries depending on the directives issued by national or regional legislative frameworks. For example, in the European Union (EU), the SEA Directive 2001/42/EC requires all member states such as the United Kingdom, Germany and others to use SEA in planning processes (Polido et al., 2014). In the Canadian context, SEA is practiced under the Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals (CEAA, 2016). Australia applies SEA variably across states with no distinctive link between the federal and state tiers of planning (Marsden, 2006). In New Zealand, Memon (2005) asserts that section 32 of the RMA institutionalised the use of SEA in 1991, to devise and refine strategic planning and policies to achieve the sustainability purpose of the RMA. However, Memon contends that the SEA purpose under section 32 has been overshadowed by dominant concerns to reduce business costs pertaining to environmental protection. As such, SEA has fallen short in delivering desirable sustainability outcomes due to minimal guidance by central government for its institutionalization, supporting the need to enhance the understanding of section 32. SEA therefore, is not formally practiced in New Zealand per se but regions are still able to use elements of SEA to ensure sustainable and environmental goals are met in regional planning processes such as in transport planning (McGimpsey and Morgan, 2013). These examples demonstrate the various challenges and contexts in which SEA is being utilized in developed countries based on their individual country needs and the legislative frameworks in which to apply it.

Following the paradigm of developed nations, the notion of SEA was introduced to developing nations by various international funding agencies such as the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), (Cape, Retief, Lochner, Fischer, & Bond, 2018; Liou & Yu, 2004; Slunge & Huyen Tran, 2014). SEA became recognized as an important part of the development assistance funding criteria to encourage good governance in developing nations. to formulate more forward-thinking and long-term policies, plans and programmes

with robust sustainability credentials that would guide sustainable development well into the project phases. Accordingly, developing nations across many geographical locations have also adopted SEA processes or elements of SEA to complement their planning processes to help achieve sustainable development. However, many factors determine the effectiveness of SEA which if not fully understood, may present many challenges for governments when implementing SEA. For example, Retief et al., (2008) studied the performance of SEA in South Africa in order to enhance the understanding of how SEA functions in developing countries. Slunge and Tran (2014) studied the Vietnamese challenges to effective SEA practice. Polido et al., (2014) examined the use of SEA in the context of small island developing states in Europe. A common challenge arising from these developing nations in regard to effective SEA practice is the need for coordination among government, practitioners, the general public and international cooperation (Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Liou and Yu, 2004; Retief et al., 2008). From the experiences of these developing countries and others, the benefits, factors and challenges of institutionalizing SEA in developing nations are discussed in more detail below in order to determine the plausibility of SEA to assist Pacific Island countries towards their efforts for advancing the sustainability Agenda 2030.

### **2.5.1 Improving project-level EIA**

The SEA literature provides a number of studies that promote SEA for improving project level EIA in developing countries (Abaza et al., 2004, Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Partidario and Clark, 2000; Therivel et al., 1992). In the context of PICs, Barr (2007) conducted a study on the role of SEA for improving project level EIA in PICs. Using Fiji and Samoa as case studies, he found that many of the limitations of EIA in theory were also encountered in practice. For example, EIA was seen by many proponents as an anti-development tool and the tool itself had lost its integrity for its intended purpose of regulating economic development within environmental limits. Barr asserts that EIA is considered the best way to promote economic development in an environmentally friendly way but lacked monitoring and enforcement of the environmental and social safeguards prescribed in the EIA reports. Consequently, development projects evade penalties as there are often no contractual agreements in place to hold proponents accountable for failing to comply with conditions described in environmental permits. The cumulative impacts of these individual projects are thus not recognized, and can have detrimental irreversible impacts on the natural

environment. Accordingly, this supports the need for incorporating environmental considerations at the higher strategic levels of planning and decision making in order to obtain a ‘birds-eye view’ to assess potential cumulative impacts of projects. This would help to identify projects that would require more technical EIA studies and guide EIA processes to incorporate robust sustainability considerations, accountability and enforcement. The findings of Barr (2007) in relation to EIA limitations in the context of PICs is consistent with studies by other EIA scholars on developing countries in other geographical regions (Alshukwait, 2005; Badr, 2009; Boyle, 1999). Accordingly, the main areas in which SEA can potentially improve project level EIA in Tonga are discussed below:

### *I. Addressing cumulative effects*

The problem with assessing projects is that they are too site specific. Many of the important decisions at the strategic level such as location and cost, are already made by government agencies and by the time stakeholders are consulted as part of the EIA process, little input and changes can be made with the recommendation of the concerned groups. As such, the impacts or effects of the specific development on other sectors and communities is not captured, let alone realised when assessing projects on a case by case basis. In this sense, the assessment of environmental and social effects at a higher more strategic level would provide a holistic view and enable the early detection of cumulative impacts and thereby avoid costly and irreversible mistakes from poor planning procedures.

### *II. Complements and improves project level processes*

According to Abaza et al., 2004, Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Partidario, 2000) applying SEA can assist in lessening the financial and technical burden of project level EIA. Dalal-Clayton and Sadler (2005) contend that SEA can help to integrate environmental considerations at the policy and planning level and streamline projects which strengthens project EIA. By identifying the cumulative impacts of sectoral planning in accordance to what sectors can accommodate within their ecological limits, SEA can identify where EIA is really necessary thus saving time and costs in the long term. This is especially helpful in the context of PICs where financial and human resources have been identified as the main challenges for effective EIA practice (Barr, 2007; Onorio, 2000). As such, in respect to

the SDGs, SEA may also be able to help PICs identify the type of developments that are not applicable to their individual contexts and opt out at policy level thus eliminating the need for project level EIAs.

### *III. Aligns regional, national and sectoral planning to guide EIA at project levels*

Alshuwaikhat (2005) emphasizes the importance of understanding the multi-level and tiered nature of policies and plans and that SEA should be able to link such tiers to be applied where it best fits for purpose. Barr (2007) found that in the case of Fiji, the lack of forward-thinking or strategic planning processes impeded the effective practice of EIA. Understanding the levels of policies and plans (for example, national or sectoral level) in PICs is thus important to determine where SEA can be best applied to provide an overview of the wider implications of the smaller activities planned for that particular sector. Accordingly, the overlaps and duplication of work as well as synergies with other sectoral plans can be identified and foster partnerships to achieve common goals. This means that time and resources are used more effectively when the sectoral plans are implemented at the project phase thereby improving the EIA outcomes. Alshuwaikhat (2005), further reinforces this approach stating that the practical and broad nature of assessing impacts in SEA can facilitate the evaluation of national and sectoral implications and allow consideration of potential cumulative and synergistic effects from a strategic standpoint. The early detection of potential cumulative effects can thus set the platform for identifying projects with adverse environmental effects and avoid them altogether. As a result, the implementation of EIA is conducted in a more efficient manner and facilitates the effective use of limited financial and technical resources.

The SDGs being a global framework and implemented across many geographical locations around the world demonstrates the need for regional and national cooperation. Following the paradigm of the European Union, it may be necessary for PICs to consider developing an SEA directive under the auspices of a Pacific regional partnership to advance their stance and commitment for environmental protection. Given the potential resistance of developing countries to adopt SEA due to the current problems faced in EIA (Barr, 2007), such regional cooperation may potentially strengthen and facilitate the institutionalization of SEA in each member country. Accordingly, endorsing SEA through the lens of SDGs may elicit its uptake in the Pacific region and underpin the theme of the SDGs for inclusivity and “leaving

no one behind”. In effect, the regional body, for example, the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Programme (SPREP) will also benefit in achieving their regional goals for supporting and enhancing environmental governance in Pacific Island countries.

### **2.5.2 Good governance**

Good governance is increasingly regarded as vital for the success of a nation and the wellbeing of its people. Governance is about power and authority and how a country manages its affairs including resource management, addressing social conflicts and managing cultural and political interplays (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2014). Many SEA scholars promote SEA as a tool that facilitates good governance for implementing sustainable development (Axelsson et al., 2012; Mulder, 2011; Polido, João, & Ramos, 2014; Wirutskulshai et al., 2011). Mulder, (2011) studied the role of SEA in promoting and facilitating good governance. He outlined three key attributes of SEA aligned to core elements of good governance; 1) Promoting transparency and accountability in decision-making; 2) Improving the participation of stakeholders to improve strategic actions; 3) Systematically questioning the environmental quality of strategic decisions to increase accountability and credibility of decision makers. Mulder, further iterates that despite SEA being initially conceived as a technical process to assist more informed decision making, planning processes and decision-making, generally lack scientific rigor and were constantly undermined by uncertainty, conflict and ambiguity. Hence, SEA is increasingly being adapted as a process that facilitates dialogue, collaboration of all stakeholders in policy and planning to increase efficiency, legitimacy and accountability in decision making.

The focus thus shifts to institution-centred SEA (I-SEA). This approach justifies that in order for SEA to be effective at the policy and planning level, it should be focused on assessing institutions and governance systems that underpin environmental and social management rather than on predicting impacts of alternative policy and plan actions (Slunge et al., 2009). If governments in Pacific Island countries are able to effectively address the needs of their people through appropriate and timely responses to their development needs, they increase their credibility and gain the trust of their people. Some of the pertinent needs of their communities include satisfactory health and education services, support for small local businesses and access to clean energy and food security (PRES, 2004 ). These basic necessities often place demands

on natural resources and most governments do not realize the total cumulative impacts that these basic needs have on the limited natural resources. A good starting point to acknowledging these impacts is through improved communication. Accordingly, the key to good governance is transparency and open dialogue and interaction among the government, business and communities to gain their views in order to inform policy and planning processes around development and support better decision-making.

However, governments, business and communities are not the only ones involved in decision-making around development in PICs. From a governance perspective, the layers of decision making extend to complex relations between the government of the nation and development partners such as donor agencies (World bank, Asian Development Bank), multilateral environmental agencies (such as United Nations Development Programmes), bilateral agencies (e.g New Zealand Aid, Japan International Cooperation Assistance) and also regional environmental bodies such as the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP). Within this multi-faceted governance context concerning post-colonial international relations (bilateral assistance) and neo-colonialism, in particular the increasing influence of aid from China in PICs, important questions around who drives change, what purposes are intended and whose interest does it serve must also be taken into account when trying to understand governance systems in PICs.

Pacific Island countries have over the years increased their reliance on international and bilateral aid which suggests that such donor and international aid agencies also exert influence on the national affairs of developing countries. For example, major donors such as World Bank, ADB, etc., may potentially exert their development agenda without fully addressing the needs of country (Axelsson et al., 2012; Richardson & Cashmore, 2011). These development partners have certain criteria and conditions for granting loans and financial assistance to developing nations. For example, the World Bank promotes SEA as a tool to promote good governance in nations and is one of their lending criteria (Goodland, 2005). The OECD promotes SEA as a mechanism that holistically improves governance in developing nations as well as supporting donors' harmonization and alignment efforts in reforming the ways in which aid is administered in countries to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of development assistance (OECD, 2006).



Despite the promotion of SEA by these development partners, the way that development aid is administered in these national processes does not provide for monitoring or follow up to determine if countries are actually practicing good governance. In other words, there are no mechanisms for accountability and the donors themselves cannot force the governments to take on SEA if they do not have the human, technical and financial resources to do so (Cashmore, 2011). Therefore, the onus is on the institutions themselves for adopting and effectively implementing SEA. Conversely, SEA is an impact assessment process that is not well known in the PICs and has not been institutionalized despite earlier efforts by development partners to promote its use (Levett and McNally, 2003). Most Pacific Island countries, however, have EIA legislative processes in place to guide their development (Appendix A). Essentially, the awareness of SEA is increasing as development partners and regional environmental organizations, in particular, the Secretariat for the Pacific Environmental Programme (SPREP) is promoting its use for good governance and developing guidelines to encourage PICs to institutionalize SEA (SPREP, 2016).

### **2.5.3 Advancing the sustainability Agenda**

The early phases of SEA evolution generated debate on what SEA should encompass for integrating sustainability considerations in PPP processes. Sadler (1996) argued that SEA should have a clear purpose and role in modern governance towards environmental sustainability, maintaining focus on the environment. He contended that including social and economic issues would dilute the role of SEA in safeguarding environmental sustainability and limits of natural systems. His argument generated debate among SEA scholars on whether SEA should include social and economic impacts of PPP or just focus on the ecological and biophysical aspects of the environment. According to Partidario (2011) SEA has evolved from its technical focus on biophysical impacts towards including impacts on social and economic aspects of development, forming the pillars of what constitutes sustainable development. As such, many SEA scholars concur that in order for sustainable development to be achieved through SEA, the economic, social and environmental aspects as well as the wider cultural and health impacts need to be effectively considered in decision making (Bina, 2008; Boyle, 1998; Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; Fischer, 2007; Partidario et al., (2008); Stinchcombe and Gibson, 2001; White and Noble, 2013).

According to Bina (2008) and Fischer (2007), the ability of SEA to contribute to sustainability hinges on a well-defined framework for its application. Specifically, SEA needs to be systematic, adaptive and structured in a way that effectively integrates sustainability considerations into various contexts of decision-making processes. The importance of understanding SEA and sustainability concepts among government, business, society and practitioners in the context of their own countries is therefore emphasized (Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Bina 2008; Slunge et al., 2014). Moreover, understanding the decision-making process is equally emphasized to identify where SEA may be able to influence the outcomes of sustainability goals. It would be useful to analyse the type of strategic action where SEA can best contribute to and how it can practically be institutionalized according to the country's technical and financial capacity. Accordingly, understanding where SEA would fit in relation to existing practice of PPP formulation processes and its role in respect to other impact assessment tools such as EIA as well as the investment implications and benefits of using SEA is worth investigating. The following section analyses the models and general process of SEA application and elements for effective SEA practice derived from developing countries' experience in adopting SEA. It is anticipated that similar elements will be required in the context of PICs and more specifically in Tonga, however, some or all of the following elements may be applicable to some PICs depending on their context specific needs for the SEA process.

## **2.6 SEA in Small Island States**

Despite the plethora of SEA studies in varying country contexts and geographical regions, very few studies on SEA in small islands have emerged over the past 20 years (Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Polido et al., 2014). The small islands in these studies, share similar characteristics with Pacific Island countries (PICs) such as limited natural resources, small populations and geographical isolation and dispersal of islands. Their small land masses, often scattered across vast ocean spaces, pose developmental challenges, exacerbated by growing populations exerting pressure on degrading resources (Roberts et al., 2007). Given the need to develop within their confined resource limits, sustainability goals are vital for survival and are at the forefront of most development plans, policies and programmes in small islands. However, despite the extensive research discussing sustainability aspects in small islands, the majority primarily focus on individual environmental, social or economic issues and sectors

(Polido et al., 2014). Hence, there is a lack of research that review and analyse the holistic approaches to integrate sustainability and in particular, using SEA for planning in PICs. From this perspective, this research attempts to enhance the understanding of the potential of SEA application in Tonga to elucidate what it might mean for other small island countries in PICs.

### **2.6.1 SEA in Pacific Island Countries**

A number of SEA studies have been conducted in PICs since the 1990s (Table 3). These studies were commissioned by regional and international development agencies to support the development of a policy or plan as part of their requirements for donor support. The studies were focussed on fast growing industries or sectors that have high potential in generating economic benefits and potentially resulting in drastic impacts on the natural and social environment. Both studies illustrate the role of international development agencies in introducing and promoting the use of SEA and other impact assessment tools in Pacific Island Countries. As such, these were one off cases using the SEA, subjected only to policies, plans and programmes deemed necessary by these international agencies. To date, SEA is not required as mandatory for PICs to use in their PPP processes and has not been institutionalized as part of the policy or plan setting process. This may be attributed to a lack of technical and financial capacity to carry out SEA studies. However, the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme is in the process of developing the Strategic Environmental Guidelines for Pacific Island Countries (SPREP, 2018) to guide PICs in institutionalizing SEA.

Moreover, the case studies suggest some factors to consider and practical challenges for institutionalizing SEA in Pacific Island Countries and Tonga. Similar viewpoints around country-driven approaches and SEA ownership, effective stakeholder engagement were emphasized in both case studies. The factors and challenges identified above are considered within the wider SEA literature concerning challenges for SEA practice in developing countries around the world. This will allow the researcher to draw similarities and differences of the challenges faced in relation to the various country contexts in which SEA is being applied. A final set of potential challenges can then be drawn to form the basis for the SEA Evaluation criteria that will guide the document analysis of this study.

**Table 3: List of SEA Studies conducted in Pacific Island Countries**

<b>Tonga:</b> <i>Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Neiafu Master Plan, 1996</i>	<b>Fiji:</b> <i>A Strategic Environmental Assessment of Fiji's Tourism Development Plan, 2003</i>
<p><b>Objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The study was commissioned by the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, to examine the cumulative environmental and social impacts of a number of development projects proposed for Neiafu Master Plan as part of the wider development programme for the island of Vava'u in Tonga.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supported by ADB, WWF- South Pacific Programme, the study aimed to inform the mid-term review of the Tourism Development Plan by assessing the environmental and sustainable development impacts of the current plan, and also tested the usefulness of SEA for improving the sustainability of strategies and plans in the Asia-Pacific Region.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Findings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local ownership is important to champion the recommendations of the report</li> <li>- Effective public engagement strategies are important but were not carried out as part of the SEA study itself but relied on the stakeholder engagement conducted by previous reports.</li> <li>- Tiering nature of SEA. The report highlighted the projects that should be avoided and those that would require more extensive EIA studies in the project phases.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Key Findings:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ecosystems of importance such as coral reefs were reaching tipping points as a result of major tourism activities</li> <li>- Economic returns were not retained effectively suggesting potential land use and landownership conflicts</li> <li>- Institutional and regulatory frameworks, capacity building and enforcement are required to manage the tourism industry.</li> <li>- Impact assessments recommended to guide tourism development and establish and enforce effective systems to implement its findings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lessons for SEA Practice and Institutionalization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The environmental and socio-economic impacts of tourism were identified alongside agriculture and fisheries showing an integrated approach of the study</li> <li>- Local ownership of SEA emphasized</li> <li>- Participatory approaches were recommended as vital for identifying critical issues and socially acceptable methods to address them.</li> <li>- More in depth examination of certain proposals related to waste management and social impacts is recommended for the EIA study</li> </ul>	<p><b>Lessons for SEA Practice and Institutionalization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consultants should engage with local counterparts to champion the work after the completion of the consultant's part of the SEA process.</li> <li>- Stakeholder engagement with landowners, developers, government etc and reaching consensus and finding common ground were recommended as vital for Tourism sector to grow sustainably. The role of NGOs acting as mediators was highlighted as crucial.</li> <li>- Laws, policies and regulations supporting sustainable development were recommended to be in place as a precursor for SEA to be institutionalized.</li> </ul>

## Potential Challenges for SEA in PICs

Polido et al., (2014; 2016; 2018) and Alshuwaikhat (2005) highlight key issues to consider when developing SEA sustainability-led approaches for small islands. These issues include capacity building for decision makers, SEA practitioners and the general public about the concepts of SEA and sustainable development. Moreover, public participation throughout the SEA stages is vital to ensure transparency and good governance. This would require strong commitment by government bureaucracies, and the support of regional and international agencies, to establish tools and guidelines to support participation of stakeholders and communities throughout the SEA process. Therefore, political commitment, capacity building and collaborative approaches between government and all stakeholders including cooperation with international development agencies are highlighted as the most influential factors for SEA uptake in small islands (Polido et al., 2016).

A deeper understanding of these factors in the context of PICs would thus give insight into the potential challenges for SEA adoption in Tonga. Studies on environmental impact assessment in PICs by Onorio (2000) and Barr (2007) found common challenges for effective practice. The underlying barriers emanated from: 1) the lack of clear EIA guidelines and legislation for effective implementation; 2) the lack of political commitment; 3) lack of skilled personnel and technical expertise in EIA practice and; 4) the lack of financial support. These challenges may also undermine the effective uptake of SEA in Tonga and are considered in more detail below.

### *I. SEA Guidelines and Formal Legislative Support*

The SEA literature supports the importance of formal legislative requirements for SEA to ensure its effectiveness (Wilson and Wars, 2011; Wood, 2003). The main argument is that if SEA is not formally required, no resources are allocated to support its implementation and thus, SEA is not considered important and becomes obscured in planning and decision making. In addition, the implementation of the SEA recommendations and conditions are often ignored and not effectively applied, reducing the credibility of SEA as an effective planning process. There are also studies on the practice of SEA in a voluntary and non-mandatory context (McGimpsey & Morgan, 2013; Retief, 2007). The key lesson from these studies is that SEA can be practiced in a non-mandatory context if there is sufficient legislation that support the

integration of sustainability in PPP making. SEA thus can act as a ‘refining’ process, validating the integration of sustainability considerations through increased coordination and communication among all stakeholders and affected groups as per SEA process. However, in these instances, the authors suggest that the impetus for SEA must be driven by decision-makers and government must have the capacity to implement the outcomes of SEA studies. These studies suggest factors for PICs to consider to suit the particularities of their country’s legislative processes to determine the best approaches for institutionalizing SEA. It would thus be useful to analyse current legislation, policies and guidelines supporting the SDGs and sustainability objectives to identify the need to introduce a new piece of legislation to support the SEA process. Another avenue would involve amending existing legislation on planning and policy making or impact assessment to include SEA requirements and aligning its purpose to other legislation supporting the integration of sustainability and environmental management.

## *II. Political Commitment*

Political commitment is emphasized as one of the most crucial factors for SEA uptake and effectiveness in a number of developing countries in the Asian and African regions (Liou & Yu, 2004; Polido et al., 2014; Retief, 2007; Slunge & Tran, 2014; Saxena et al., 2016). One of the purposes of SEA is to raise decision-makers awareness of environmental issues (Polido et al., 2014; Runhaar & Driessen, 2007), yet the ‘buy in’ of SEA for decision makers is often difficult to achieve. In the Asian context, Liou and Yu (2004) contend that this is due to lack of understanding and misconceptions of SEA by decision-makers and other stakeholders and call for awareness and training programmes to elucidate the benefits and processes of SEA. The traditional EIA-driven approach of SEA is still prevalent in developing countries of South Asia and most governments are not open to the scrutiny of their policies, plans and programs (Saxena et al., 2016). The prevailing pressures for economic development driven by donor agencies has supported to some extent, the introduction and use of SEA in developing countries. However, studies have shown that the effectiveness of SEA to achieve its purpose for sustainability requires a number of support mechanisms that must be implemented by the governments themselves (Levett and MacNally, 2003; Slunge & Huyen Tran, (2014). To illustrate, donor agencies assist only in contractual agreements to secure technical assistance in the form of SEA consultants to conduct the SEA studies. However, once the recommendations are submitted to government, the impetus for ‘following through’ and implementing, monitoring and evaluating the recommendations of the SEA findings rests

within government. Thus, the donor agencies can only get SEA ‘half-way to the finish line’. Government and SEA administrators need to take it the rest of the way for SEA to really achieve its purpose for attaining sustainability. This directs attention to the institutional settings and arrangements in which SEA is to be administered and is explored further in the next chapter.

In the context of PICs, it must be realized that there are various sources of international aid assistance provided by bilateral aid agencies which do not always advocate the use of SEA. In this sense, the government should be able to negotiate appropriate terms regarding environmental and social protection procedures in line with local legislature to ensure that sustainability issues are addressed. However, the previous experience of the researcher in impact assessment found that decision-makers are often rushed and under pressure to move things forward quickly within their term of governance. This prevents them from investing time and resources to assess the impacts of development plans and policies, particularly when foreign aid agencies provide grants and loans to implement such plans within a given timeframe. This suggests that development in PICs is largely donor driven and often subjected to contract terms of the donors, which implies that political will is determined by factors around the government-donor-aid processes. As the SDGs gain traction globally with SDG 17 focussing on partnerships for achieving the SDGs, the real purpose for sustainable development may be construed as a mechanism for achieving yet more financial aid. This may result in further reliance by PICs on foreign aid assistance and steer them further away from economic stability for sustainable development. Accordingly, further understanding on the institutional settings needs to be explored for deeper insight on decision making processes to determine if such donor-aid assistance are supporting sustainable development purposes from an economic and financial perspective to meet the SDGs.

Given the high recognition of SDGs as the common language for achieving sustainability among all sectors, promoting SEA as a ‘vehicle’ to assist in national efforts for achieving the SDGs has potential to project itself as a useful tool to align sustainability objectives across government, business and society (Hacking 2019; Nilsson and Persson, 2017). The commitment of the PICs, including Tonga as members of the United Nations, to report progress of SDGs to the respective United Nations organisations provides an avenue for the purpose and role of SEA to be aligned to national efforts and live up to its purpose of advancing the sustainability agenda. Accordingly, in order for SEA to counter the challenge of

political commitment for its uptake, its importance for sustainable planning must be recognized as vital for national planning by traditionally powerful Ministries such as the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Prime Minister's Office in order to gain political will for its adoption and effective implementation (Nilsson and Persson, 2017).

### *III. Financial Support*

Since the widespread adoption of the EIA concepts globally, major projects that are funded by international and bilateral donor agencies require an EIA study as part of conditional requirements for funding. Following this paradigm, the promotion and need for SEA as a criterion for financial lending strategies, programme support, technical assistance has been adopted by the World Bank, OECD and other financial aid agencies (Goodland, 2005, OECD, 2012, World Bank 2003). Given the poor economic stability of PICs, SEA may need the support of such organisations and other development partners to enable its institutionalization. Barr (2007) asserts that applying SEA as a separate process would require more administrative and financial resources to enable its uptake by Governments in PICs. Dalal-Clayton and Sadler (2005) contend that multilateral development banks are most suited to assist and promote the development of SEA in developing countries that need it for sustainable development but may not be able to absorb the process. In this sense, international cooperation as highlighted by Polido et al., (2016) may be a crucial factor for SEA adoption in PICs.

Learning from the case of Vietnam, Slunge and Tran (2014) stated that the introduction and institutionalization of SEA was made possible through the financial and technical assistance of European countries such as Denmark. However, as Vietnam increased their economic stability, the sustainability and effectiveness of SEA, became a concern as the reliance on the donor agencies to support the SEA system meant that the country was not equipped to institutionalize the process themselves. As a result, Slunge and Tran found a disparity between the quality of SEA reports supported by donor agencies and the quality of SEA reports produced locally. Specifically, the SEA process as required by legislation introduced in 2005 was not carried out effectively by local SEA experts due to their disregard of interactive public consultation procedures. Moreover, the timing of the commissioning of SEA was conducted too late in the PPP process which contributed to the ineffectiveness of SEA in practice. This example demonstrates that despite the best efforts of donor agencies to build local capacity on SEA, the adoption and practice of SEA was still weak. Hence, carefully



analyzing the present institutional capacities and resources (financial, technical, political) is crucial to determine which approach, model or form of SEA would be most appropriate for PICs in order to understand the implications of using SEA in the long term.

#### *IV. Capacity Building*

Capacity building needs in PICs will need to be considered in accordance with the factors for effective SEA practice (Partidario, 2005). Capacity building needs may involve the following: 1) Political components that entail developing, reviewing or amending EIA legislation to include SEA requirements, seeking opportunities to gain high level ministerial support and devising legal provisions for public involvement mechanism; 2) Technical components that require development of i) SEA guidelines; ii) SEA review system; iii) Monitoring and evaluation criteria and; 3) Financial and Human Resources components concerning budget support and staff training and recruitment. A thorough analysis of the institutional settings in PICs is therefore necessary to understand the current capacity in PICs for the potential institutionalization of SEA for planning.

#### *V. National, Regional and International Cooperation*

Lessons from EIA failures in developing countries point to the importance of achieving effective implementation in practical conditions and power relations that influence all sectors, ministries and departments. Certainly, it is beneficial to link policy making, planning and SEA at the municipal level as well, placing strong emphasis on public and stakeholder engagement. This draws attention to the current approaches and methods for public engagement to discern their effectiveness and how they might be improved. Extensive public participation, including the public and NGOs, is necessary to prove the reliability in drawing and implementing SEA. However, Alshukwait, (2005) cautions that strategic issues, by definition, are higher level and long term, and people's interest on their perceived effects may not be evident or of an immediate concern to them. He contrasts this to public engagement in EIA where a project situated in their locality will be seen very differently. In addition, Alshukwait argues that it should be realized that, in the case of plans and policies of a more abstract nature (for example, long-term objectives or purpose), the effects on the public will only be indirect and there will be little public interest in getting involved. Accordingly, there is a need to develop simplified SEA procedures that would be consistent with the availability of resources and existing

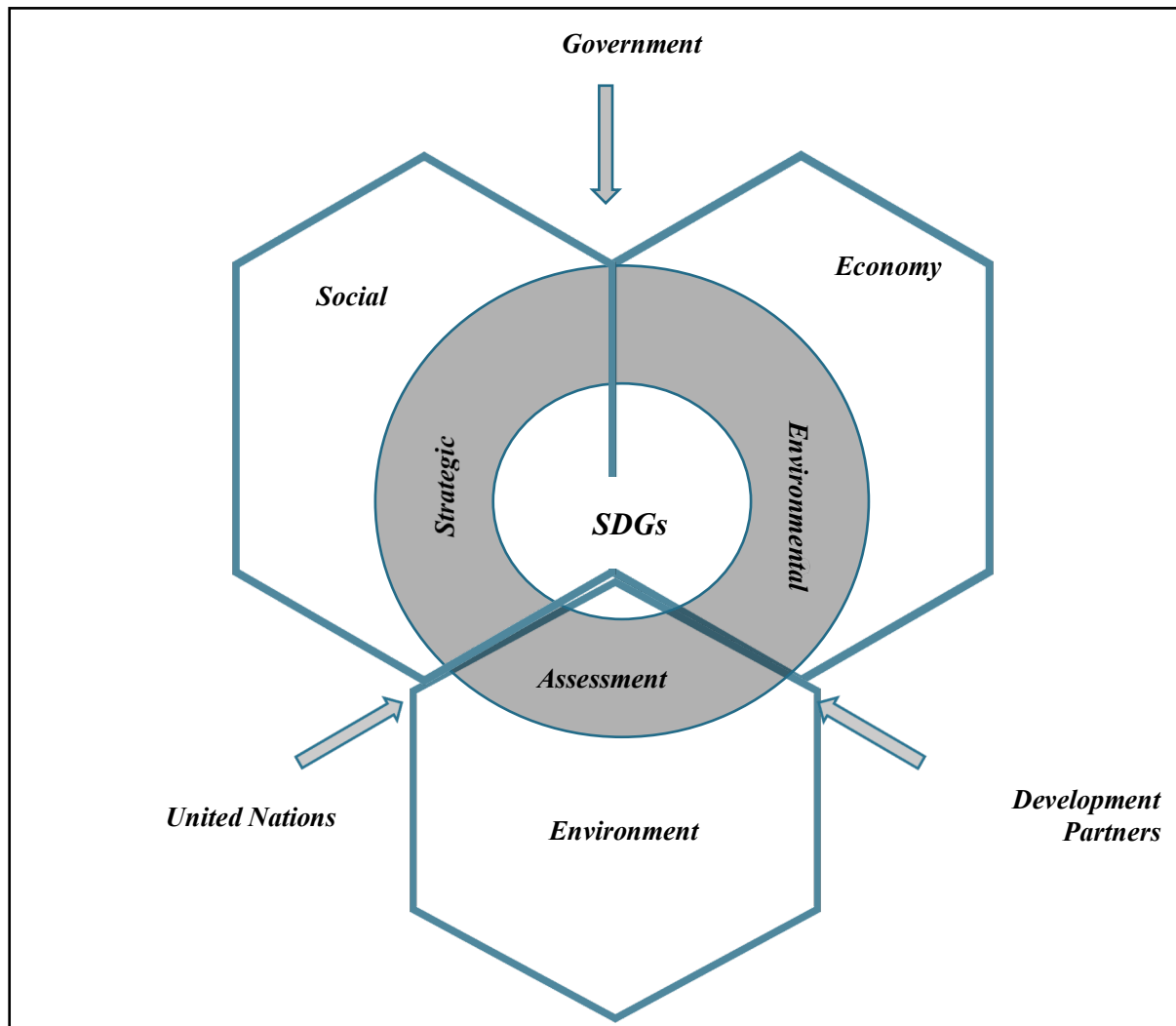
program and policy frameworks within the country. SEA practitioners therefore, need to understand the nature of policy planning and decision-making processes at the national level in order to tailor their knowledge of SEA to effectively engage local stakeholders who may not be well versed with SEA .

## **2.7 Conceptual model of SEA and sustainable development goals**

Drawing from the experiences of developing countries' experiences in SEA practice (Polido et al. 2014) and the study by Barbier (1987), the researcher has illustrated a model of the sustainable development pillars for achieving the SDGs in relation to the role of government, development partners and the United Nations (figure 3). The conceptual model shows SEA as the 'glue' that ties all pillars together in the sustainability sphere and is centred around the SDGs and supported by the main 'drivers' of development (government, United Nations, Development Partners). In theory, this framework appears to be neat and linear provided that some variables remain constant. However, in our rapidly changing world, SEA is constantly evolving to adapt to the changing political and cultural environments that affect SEA practice and effectiveness, while maintaining focus on integrating environmental, social and economic concerns into development planning. Accordingly, SEA can support government's mediator role to ensure that there are checks and balances to ensure that the natural environment, social and economic interests are each satisfied.

If government becomes biased towards maximising economic benefits at the expense of the social and natural environment, this could be labelled as corruption, bad governance, poor planning etc. If government becomes fixated on preserving the environment, it may restrict economic growth and potentially fail to meet the modern development needs of the people. Moreover, if government becomes focused on preserving its people's culture and traditional practices, without considering the impacts on the economy and the environment, problems may occur around fairness and equitable distribution and use of resources. This illustrates that governments need to understand their role as the mediator to ensure all three interests are best served and suggests the need to be impartial when identifying and assessing the alternatives to achieve the best sustainability outcomes.

*Figure 3: Pillars of Sustainable Development Goals and SEA*



*Source: adapted from Barbier, (1987) and Polido et al., (2014).*

Assessing alternatives for the best sustainable option is a vital component of the SEA process. Within the sphere in which SEA is placed around the economic, social and environmental pillars, the deeper formal and informal institutions are embedded. These institutional parameters form the underlying factors that will influence the way in which SEA will play its role for achieving SDGs. The formal and informal institutional aspects of decision making therefore, need to be understood and are explored in the next chapter around the policy and planning processes in Tonga.

## Chapter 3

## 3 Institutional Analysis: Theory and Practice in Tonga

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This chapter discusses the formal planning processes in Tonga and how it revolves around sustainable development which has become an intrinsic part of their development. Drawing on the concepts of institutional theory, the chapter provides a brief overview of Tongan history which was instrumental in establishing the current norms, cultural practices and traditions which are still being strongly practiced and have shaped values in the Tongan society. The power relations which influence decision making and how they affect environmental management and development are also highlighted towards the end of this chapter.

### 3.1 Introduction

When conducting research in particular country settings, an analysis of the institutions is necessary to understand the effects of specific institutional arrangements and dynamics that affect functional stability and changes (Poteete, 2010). Institutions refer to commonly understood rules of what one must, may or may not do in particular situations (Ostrom, 1990). These rules are commonly understood as legislative, policy directions that constitute the institutional framework and provide the basis to develop criteria that can assess the progress towards achieving the desired objectives. An institutional analysis draws out issues of equity, risk management and conflict management which are concerns that must be considered in planning processes pertaining to sustainable development (Poteete, 2010). From this perspective, analysing the laws and regulations, governance structures, human resources and capacity affecting planning and impact assessment is necessary to understand the barriers that may influence the institutionalization of SEA. Given that institutions are rooted in social, economic and political contexts shaped by history and cultural values (Poteete, Janssen and Ostrom, 2010), an institutional analysis usually involves a broad scope that requires multi-disciplinarity, particularly in understanding policy and planning processes. The concepts of institutional theory are employed in this chapter to enable a deeper understanding of the problems pertaining to environmental management in Tonga.

### 3.2 National planning processes in Tonga

The national planning process in Tonga is coordinated by the National Planning Division currently under the Office of the Prime Minister. The country's major development plan that sets out the Kingdom's vision, aims and aspirations for development is the Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015-2025 (TSDF II). This document is built on the 2015 revision of the Tonga Strategic Development Framework I (2011-2014) and aims to achieve the purpose of inclusiveness following the changes in the Tongan constitution in 2010, which has paved way for a more democratic vision for policy planning and development. Tonga became a member of the United Nations in September, 1999 and as such, adopted the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda in 2015. Therefore, the revision of the TSDF I was timely as it enabled the incorporation of the SDGs into the key national goals and outcomes of the TSDF II.

### 3.2.1 From MDGs to SDGs in Tonga

At the close of 2015, Tonga submitted to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) its final National Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report as required under the MDGs Accelerated Framework. The purpose of the Tonga MDG 2015 report was to evaluate the government approaches and institutional challenges for achieving the MDGs and to recommend sustainable pathways for beyond 2015. This process of formulating the MDG 2015 report provided the opportunity to assess the public sector as a measure of good governance. According to Sutherland (2000), good governance is an intervention for the “Pacific Paradox”, a term the World Bank used to describe countries that have strong human and resource bases yet slow economic progress and stability (World Bank, 1993). Good governance is defined as improved transparency, accountability, equity and efficiency in the management and use of resources in the Pacific (PIF, 2005a, p4). A study by Roberts *et al.*, (2007) on governance in the Pacific Islands context found that the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme and the Pacific Plan of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) have influenced the Pacific Islands to move towards good governance as a prerequisite for economic growth and sustainable development (Roberts et al., 2007). The study reviewed the Pacific Plan developed by the PIF that highlighted good governance as a mechanism to include civil society in order to push for democracy. However, a key finding of a study by Robert *et al.*, (2007), is that the Pacific plan failed to take into account the history and geographical challenges and smallness of the Pacific islands, instead relying on models of developed countries and applying it to the Pacific context. Given that sustainability efforts are country and context specific, Robert et al. (2007) contend that the Pacific Plan should have taken into account the unique environmental and cultural settings of the Pacific region.

Despite the shortcomings of the Pacific Plan, the momentum from regional and development partners for promoting good governance was perhaps influential for the reform in Tonga’s constitution towards democracy in 2010. The reform allowed for the first elections in 2010 where the people were given an opportunity to choose their leaders rather than the usual practice of nominating a noble or royal to be the nation’s Prime Minister and head of government (Campbell, 2018). Consequently, Tonga realized the importance of participatory approaches in developing their national plans and this is reflected in the recommendations of the MDG 2015 report and TSDF II to develop partnership frameworks for collaboration with NGOs and communities to make impact for SDGs.

As discussed in chapter 1, the MDGs were seen as an influential framework for global economic development that informed the focus for the SDGs. Specifically, the UN MDG 2015 report highlighted that unlike its predecessor, the SDGs should be more focused on enhancing ecosystem health and biodiversity as a means to tackle poverty, climate change and ensure participatory approaches to involve communities who are at the forefront of ecosystem management towards sustainability. As such, Tonga's national development framework and related action plans, policies and programmes that contribute directly to achieving ecosystem health and biodiversity, SDGs 13, 14 and 15 will be analysed to determine the extent in which SDGs are integrated at the policy, national planning and sectoral level.

### **3.2.2 Aligning Tonga's Strategic Development Framework to the SDGs**

Tonga seeks to find a balance between its social, economic, and environmental needs in the short term in order to sustain its growth and development in the long term (TSDF II, 2015-2025). There is little value in developing a plan without practically considering the means to implement it. One of the recommendations from the Tonga MDG 2015 report to implement the TSDF II, was to seek financial support from multilateral and bilateral agencies, to implement activities to meet SDGs targets. One way to leverage funding is for the TSDF II to demonstrate clear alignment to SDGs and establish measurable indicators specific to Tonga's context. According to Cashmore et al., (2011), international donor agencies continuously seek ways to assist countries in meeting sustainable development targets. However, this may not always be beneficial or in the best interests for sustainability in Tonga.

The TSDF II emphasizes the importance of maintaining Tonga's sovereignty amidst increasing influence on their development by international agencies. This supports the need for capacity building and developing mechanisms that promote transparency and good governance to ensure that the needs of the people are addressed. For this purpose, the role of civil servants and their commitment and service delivery as mediators for change and achieving the national objectives for sustainability is highlighted in the TSDF II. Specifically, the need for establishing a system that reviews the status of achieving the objectives of the TSDF II in relation to SDGs in its policies, plans and programmes (PPPs) is vital. Systematic approaches are vital for achieving sustainability, where inter-dependencies on the links between the three pillars of sustainability (social-economic-environment) are acknowledged and explicitly accounted for across all tiers of the planning, design and decision-making processes.

### 3.2.3 Level of participatory approaches in planning

The degree of public participation in planning has changed dramatically over the last few decades. Lane (2005), provides a review of a number of planning models that have emerged over the years to distinguish the various planning approaches that determine the extent and modes of consultation practice. He contends that in general, planning approaches have changed from the dominant synoptic models which emphasized scientific logic from a planners point of view to transactive approaches which elicits mutual learning, supporting institutional and personal development. A review of past development frameworks and sectoral plans and revised Tonga Strategic Development Framework II and the Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management and other sectoral plans indicate that Tonga has also shifted its planning approaches from mostly synoptic planning to a transactive planning model. Tonga's governance was once centralised and bureaucratic in that decisions were mostly made by government with little consultation of the public and relevant stakeholders (TSDF I). With the transition to democracy after the 2010 constitutional reform, participatory approaches became recognized as important and this is reflected in the planning models of recent policies, plans and programmes (JNAP II, 2015; TFSP, 2016; TASP, 2016).

Given that ecosystems support a number of interconnected communities, providing resources for their livelihoods, it is logical that ecosystem management should entail effective participatory approaches for community involvement. (Ntona & Morgera, 2017); Mohammed, Steinbach and Steele, 2017). To ensure community participation in the conservation sector in Tonga, the National Strategy and Biodiversity Action plan (NBSAP) has a thematic area particularly focused on NGOs and local communities for conservation projects. This provides a platform for knowledge and information exchange on issues that are threatening biodiversity and had both positive and negative consequences for government. On the one hand, communities are given a voice in the decision making process and have a chance to express values and needs to be addressed, which increases transparency and improves government's image for good governance. On the other hand, conflicts about traditional knowledge versus scientific knowledge emerge and also social and cultural needs are contested against environmental sustainability needs. For example, mangroves are of ecological importance as nursery grounds for fish and other marine organisms (Malimali, 2013). However, communities may not be aware of the dangers of over harvesting mangroves to meet traditional and cultural demands for firewood, tapa making etc. If ecological limits are not realized and imposed,



damage to the mangrove ecosystem could reach irreversible levels, that could lead to vulnerability to storm surges when such mangroves that act as natural buffers, are destroyed. It seems logical therefore, to merge traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge to achieve more effective outcomes for ecosystem management.

Furthermore, there is an increased awareness of the value of traditional knowledge for supplementing technical and planning limitations particularly in relation to co-management of resources (Hastings, Gruby, & Sievanen, 2012; Teh, Teh, Starkhouse, & Rashid Sumaila, 2009; Webster et al., 2017). These studies, demonstrate that community involvement in the planning phases helps to identify the communities' values and practices. Such values are vital for understanding the demands on the natural resources in order to establish control measures for managing ecosystems through appropriate policies and plans to improve their use. Accordingly, the inclusion of the community in the formulation of the TSDF II and other plans pertaining to ecosystem management was radical for Tonga as it ensured that the social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development are adequately addressed. However, Tonga still needs to find the nexus between traditional and technical knowledge in order to synergise and integrate efforts towards sustainable development. This supports the need for developing culturally acceptable and appropriate stakeholder engagement approaches to enhance community and stakeholder engagement throughout all levels of policy and planning processes.

### **3.3 Sustainability considerations in Tonga**

#### **3.3.1 Intergenerational equity**

Throughout history, much can be learnt from indigenous people and how they lived as one with nature. For example, for the indigenous Native Americans known as the Algonquins, an integral part of their planning involved one person taking the task of ensuring that the needs of 7 generations into the future are met. The concept of intergenerational equity was derived from Native American history which focuses on sustainability needs between generations. The notion of a Seven Generation Sustainability Principle is a concept that urges present generations to live and work for the benefit of the 7<sup>th</sup> generation into the future (Clarkson, Morrisette, & Regallet, 1992). However, the actual meaning of 7 generations as practiced in native American cultures is that present generations must consider the 3 generations before

them to learn from their sustainable practices, then look at the current practices of the present generation and then consider how the past and current practices can be improved to ensure that the future 3 generations' needs are met (McLester, 2017). In this approach, the native Americans were able to live and practice the actual principles of sustainability long before it was used as the basis for the term intergenerational equity.

Applying intergenerational equity in Tonga would entail determining limitations for present generations and the reserves for future generations. The TSDF II does not use or refer to the concepts of intergenerational equity, let alone the 7 Generations Principle. It does however, acknowledge that conflicts will arise in the quest for achieving sustainability. The researcher believes that the consideration of this intergenerational equity could deepen Tonga's understanding of conflicts and the 7<sup>th</sup> Generation Principles can potentially help to devise better policy interventions for equitable management approaches for communities to meet their needs within ecological limits and without diminishing resources for future generations.

### **3.3.2 Intragenerational principles**

Intragenerational principles focus on the sustainable needs within rather than between generations. An important consideration under this concept is to avoid exploiting poorer countries and regions to create even greater wealth for the richer countries. The Tonga MDG report 2015 acknowledged that environmental sustainability is key to securing an economic future for Tonga. The fisheries sector has reported economic losses due to illegal foreign fishing activities targeting species of high commercial value such as tuna and sea cucumbers. As such, regulations to combat illegal fishing practices have been enacted. However, as populations continue to increase and put further pressure on natural resources to increase economic stability, Tonga may reach a stage in which they would have to choose between meeting export needs or retaining these commercial resources for their own use. Moreover, inevitable impacts from climate change impacts and natural disasters may undermine existing export forecasts and further exacerbate the pressure on natural resources to meet local food demands. The economic returns from exporting local produce versus the integrity of natural resources including biodiversity may need to be examined to address some of intragenerational issues in Tonga. Therefore, mechanisms such as robust policies to safeguard itself and deter foreign investors from over-exploiting its ecosystem resources may need to be established and enforced in the near future.

### **3.4 Institutional theory**

Institutional theory focuses on the inscrutable and resilient aspects of social structure (Scott, 2004). It describes the processes in which the authoritative guidelines for social behaviour are established, through understanding the structures of rules, norms, culture and traditions. It therefore considers the historical and temporal aspects of how these elements are created and how they change in response to conflict and change in social structures. A deep understanding of these elements is therefore warranted to understand social behaviour affecting management in institutions (Dacin et al., 2002; Scott, 2004). These social aspects of institutions are recognized as a vital component for adapting SEA to suit local contexts in which it is being applied (Boyle, 1998; Bina 2008).

The cultural factors affecting implementation of PPPs in Tonga need to be examined to determine if there are strategies that can overcome cultural barriers to implementation. Firstly, a description of the historical background that has been instrumental in moulding the behaviour of Tongan people and how they interact with each other is provided. This is then followed by an assessment of the implementation of environmental policies in particular, the environmental impact assessment (EIA) Act, 2003 which is the backbone of environmental management in Tonga. Finally, the section concludes with an explanation of Tongan cultural values that affect EIA implementation and suggest solutions where possible to overcome cultural barriers impeding implementation of EIA and environmental management in general.

#### **3.4.1 Culture in Tonga**

There are many definitions of culture which is often argued to be one of the most contested words in the English language (Hawkes, 2001). This discussion is framed around the definition provided by DeVito (2000) and Gotved (2006) who describe culture as consisting of values, beliefs, ways of behaving and communication such as language, modes of thinking, art, laws and religious, values placed on relationships which are inherited, passed on from generation to generation and bind the society together. A review of Tongan history is essential to understanding the cultural traditions, norms and beliefs of the Tongan people. This is core to understanding the behaviour of people which determines how they interact with each other and their environment.

The earliest records of the establishment of cultural beliefs and norms date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, credited to the chiefs prior to European contact (Niumeitolu, 2007). According to Niumeitolu, chiefs were worshipped as gods while the majority of the people were regarded as soulless insects or worms. This led to savage practices which appeased chiefs at the expense of neglecting the majority of the people. For example, the chiefs established a ceremony they called *'inasi* where plenty of food was wasted just to show how powerful they were, but this was of little benefit to the majority of the people. Hence, when European explorers arrived with trading goods and firepower to 'entice' the chiefs as a way to exert their foreign power, the chiefs were not dissuaded in their understanding that they were the rulers of the land and were determined to maintain power. When the first missionaries arrived to introduce Christianity in 1826, King Tupou the First was one of the first Tongans to convert to Christianity. However, Niumeitolu argues that this was not for religious purposes but rather a political tool to maintain power over the missionaries and the people. It is for this reason, that Tonga was never colonized and Tongans are very proud of the historical event when King Tupou the First picked up a handful of soil and lifted his hands towards the sky symbolising his yielding of Tonga to God rather than to any foreign power. The words he said during his act of dedication *Koe 'Otua Mo Tonga Ko Hoku Tofi'a* which translates to "...God and Tonga are my inheritance..." (Niumeitolu, 2007 pp.7) which has become the country's motto declared in the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II.

Tonga is regarded as a Christian nation where 98 percent of the population are Christians (Department of Statistics, 2016). Almost all activities revolve around the church. For example, most public events begin and end with a prayer. There is also a week dedicated to prayer at the beginning of every year, observed by the whole nation including civil servants who finish work half an hour earlier than usual to attend prayer services in their respective villages. However, despite the strong Christian presence in Tonga, the Tongan culture is still largely subjugated to the monarch and this as Niumeitolu argues is supported by the Free Wesleyan Church (FWC) which is the leading denomination of churches in Tonga (Department of Statistics, 2016). This support from the FWC maintains the stratified Tongan society which distinguishes, the monarch, the nobles and commoners and plays a large role in how Tongans manage their affairs and make decisions. The Tongan hierarchical social structure comprises four "successive layers, or strata, of people each with their own code of behaviours, rights and duties and accepted living standards" (Crane, 1978, p. 33 cited in Kalavite, 2010 pp. 26) which are hereditary. The king, queen and royal family are at the top, nobles and the chiefs are in the

second layer, the elite are in the third, and at the base of the hierarchy are the commoners. Social hierarchy is very important in Tongan society because it impacts all responsibilities and interactions (Ross, 2009). Therefore, cultural norms, beliefs and traditions are important to consider for the formulation and implementation of policies, plans and programs.

### **3.4.2 Environmental impact assessment (EIA) in Tonga**

Tonga adopted the EIA concept with the intention of managing project development and enacted its Environmental Impact Assessment Act in 2003 and its corresponding EIA Regulations in 2010. However, it is important to understand that applying a tool such as EIA which was designed by developed nations for their contexts would present challenges in a developing nation setting (Boyle, 1998). This points to a key message in SEA literature about the importance of understanding context when applying generic environmental management tools to be “fit for purpose” (Bina, 2008; Fundingsland Tetlow and Hanusch, 2013; Morrison-Saunders, Pope, Gunn, Bond, & Retief, 2014). Inevitably, some of these challenges were identified by the Tonga Department of Environment (DOE), mandated to enforce the EIA policies. The most obvious challenges were recognized as lack of awareness, lack of sufficient budget to operationalize EIA activities, lack of transparency and accountability and lack of human resources and capacity to implement the EIA Act (Thompson, 2014). These challenges are generic problems that are faced not only in Tonga but in other developing nations as well (Badr, 2009; Barr, 2007; Onorio, 1999).

A key feature that is often overlooked or not given much thought are the cultural factors that determine EIA implementation. This can be attributed to the assumption that when EIA processes are tailored to suit country context, the norm is to look at the formal institutional aspects of implementation relating to legislation, policies, technical capacity etc rather than informal institutions in understanding the actual behaviour of the people who are developing the policies and plans as well as implementing them. Cultural factors in EIA literature are identified in the public participation stage when dealing with interaction between the proponents, EIA regulators and the communities or indigenous populations (Hanna, Vanclay, Langdon, & Arts, 2014; Zhang, Kørnøv, & Christensen, 2013) but not always from the lens of the cultural aspects that determine the behaviour of people, including the planners and implementers (Boyle, 1998). In this context, an assessment of the aspects of the Tongan culture that affect EIA implementation are presented from the planners and implementers point of

view. Given that the researcher has had experience working in EIA in Tonga, it is worth noting that the researcher is not of Tongan descent and had very little knowledge of the Tongan culture when she began her career in EIA in 2009. Hence, the analysis of the following Tongan cultural values was conducted objectively and provided great insight into the Tongan culture which the researcher believes is vital for understanding the work environment in order to be more appreciative and effective in the Tongan workforce.

### 3.4.3 Tongan Cultural Values

Tongan culture is an integral part of how Tongans live and has a significant impact on how they behave socially, economically and politically. Ketu'u (2014) highlights four cultural values of Tongan culture, *fetokoni'aki* or reciprocity, *fevahevahe'aki* or sharing, *faka'apa'apa* or respect and *tauhi vā* or maintaining good relationships with others. While these cultural values are important and upheld by most Tongans, there are positive and negative aspects of these four cultural values which affects how Tongans support implementation of EIA and therefore, may also affect the way SEA is adopted into national planning processes and environmental management in general.

#### I. *Fetokoni'aki* or Reciprocity

*Fetokoni'aki* is when people help each other or co-operate through working for each other, helping without being asked to do so and being eager to do things for each other (Kalavite, 2010). In this context, traditional knowledge and practices in relation to the coastal environment are often acknowledged when assessing major developments. For example, the Ministry of Infrastructure addressed the concerns of traditional *taovala* making when the proposal for reclamation was raised to make way for a new domestic wharf upgrade. The approach to these *taovala* communities was important to foster collaboration and support from the communities about the project while at the same time ensuring that the development did not prevent them from continuing their traditional practices. The communities were supportive of the project and were willing to move their activities to another site without the need for compensation. It is this spirit of cooperation and helpfulness that supports many developments in Tonga and allows flexible and mutual solutions when dealing with large projects. More often than not, Tongans are happy to forego some of their privileges in order to make way for developments that will benefit the wider community. By including these communities in public

consultation processes, the government provides opportunities for Tongans to provide in-kind contributions and support for development projects particularly for infrastructure and coastal resilience projects. *Fetokoni'aki* or reciprocity in this sense is therefore valuable in EIA to ensure more informed decision making and avoid backlash in project development in Tonga.

#### II. *Fevahevahe'aki or Sharing*

An important part of the Tongan culture is sharing what they have with their neighbours without the expectation of any gifts in return. This friendly nature of the Tongan people was discovered back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Captain Cook dubbed Tonga as the “Friendly Islands” due to the warm reception and gifts accorded to him during early visits to Tonga (Kaeppler, 2016). This is considered an important part of Tongan culture, where people will often call others to share a meal and in more formal settings, sharing of resources is increasingly being encouraged and practiced, particularly in monitoring components of EIA. For example, Department of Environment would share their vehicle with other departments like the Geology department and the Health Department to conduct joint monitoring activities. Pulling together resources through integration is helpful to synergise efforts towards protecting the environment (Morrison-Saunders *et al.*, 2014) and the sharing aspect of Tongan culture greatly assists in this regard.

Despite the well-known benefits of sharing, there are also negative aspects that can impede implementation. For example, the core value of sharing creates dependency on others for help and implies that no initiatives are taken to find the means to an end. For example, sharing resources in government, creates a dependent relationship with other Ministries and does not encourage initiatives to develop better strategies to be more self-reliant in conducting monitoring work. In this sense, sharing develops feelings of contentment and does not push people to be innovative to find better solutions for limitations which if ignored over time, can result in a bigger problem, often too big to be addressed or eradicated (Mitchell, 2002). One of the problems in this regard concerns government's dependency on international aid which has reached such a level that Tonga cannot depend on its economic development to support the implementation of its policies, plans and programmes (Clemens, Kenny, & Moss, 2007). The government is always looking for opportunities and ways to engage donors to fund their programmes including in the environmental management sector (Thompson, 2014). In this light, sharing can be more harmful than good and it is important to establish limits to address

cumulative effects from dependence on sharing to meet financial support for implementation needs.

### III. *Faka'apa'apa or Respect*

The stratified social structure presents a communication barrier that oppresses the majority of the Tongan population to freely express their views in planning or decision making, let alone in implementation. Respecting those of higher rank is a central part of the *anga fakatonga* (the Tongan way), and speaking up or against elders or those in authority is considered a form of utmost disrespect (Hansen, 2004). This cultural norm of understanding 'your place' influences how Tongans interact with each other not only in their communities and churches but also in the work place (Franken, Langi, & Branson, 2016). For example, during public consultation meetings regarding a proposed development, the intended purpose of identifying all values and concerns of all stakeholders may not be well documented because of this social structure. Tongans who are commoners in the social hierarchy may feel they are the least important people and therefore will not speak up and voice their concerns if nobles or senior government officials are present in the consultation. This implies that the nobles or elite members are more likely to control the discussion and in essence only their views and concerns are captured in the process. This resonates with the concerns raised by Onorio and Morgan (1995) that participation techniques should be tailored to reflect local customs in order to allow affected individuals and communities to express their concerns and values. A possible solution therefore, is for the DOE to encourage proponents to work with town officers and the Ministry of Internal Affairs to organise smaller meetings or one on one interviews according to the different hierarchies to document all concerns. The DOE could also encourage proponents to notify church leaders when a meeting has been organised, as they could be instrumental in encouraging attendance and more importantly in providing feedback about their concerns in a socially and culturally acceptable approach.

The higher a person is in the hierarchy, the more power, respect they have and the easier it is to have a voice and make decisions (Kalavite, 2010). It is this way of thinking that delays implementation in EIA. For example, the EIA law establishes that the Minister responsible for environment has the power over the final decision of a project. The Chief Executive Officer and Director therefore have limited control in the Minister's decision because if they oppose or vocally object to the Minister's views, they would be regarded as disrespectful. Hence, this



social structure limits effective communication between those in power (elite, nobles, royal family) and the commoners for fear of social stigma if they raise their concerns. Thus, one needs to be mindful of when to speak and how to speak in a socially and culturally acceptable manner. Thompson (2014) maintains that the established system of hierarchy is still ingrained in the government of Tonga and traditional and social expectations are particularly followed by the more senior government officials. Despite the move towards democracy and change in the Tongan constitution to facilitate participatory approaches, it will take time for the transition to full democracy. Innovative approaches to work around communication and decision-making practices in Tonga may be helpful to enhance participatory approaches in EIA.

#### *IV. Tauhi vā or Maintaining good relationships with others.*

Taufe'ulungaki (2003) stated that western culture is based on individual rights and freedom, independence, justice in terms of equality and access, privacy, competition, consumerism and science whereas the Tongan culture is based on cooperation and consensus, respect, generosity, loyalty, sharing, humility, reconciliation, fulfilment of mutual obligations and reciprocity. She further asserted that the underlying purpose of western culture is to create personal wealth and individual well-being which is based on economic capital, while the underlying purpose of the Tongan culture is to maintain good relationships and strong communities and is based on social capital. These cultural differences provide an understanding about the cultural value placed on maintaining good relationships in the Tongan context and how this presents a challenge in EIA implementation. For instance, despite many non-compliance cases found since the enforcement of the EIA began in Tonga in 2010, no prosecution cases have made it to the Attorney General Office (Thompson, 2014). This is due to political and cultural factors where the decision makers or those in power avoid litigation as much as possible. Often, they use their authority to dissuade technical and junior staff from pursuing legal action and suggest other means such as multiple meetings to settle the confrontation (Thompson, 2014). Thompson cautions that this practice provides potential for corruption and impunity. This cultural practice renders technical officers in a difficult position for implementing EIA laws and resonates Boyle's (1998) findings in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

In extreme cases, the cultural challenges discussed above lead to emigration of skilled and educated workers who find that their knowledge is often disregarded by senior or elite

members of society. This is exemplified by Franken et al., (2016) where they found that most returning scholars that have studied overseas find it difficult to apply or use the knowledge gained from their studies overseas in the work force in Tonga. While some have managed to find ways to curb the cultural differences and find strategies to being heard and contribute in decision making, others have since migrated overseas to make the most of their ‘knowledge’. This presents a detrimental and almost opposite effect to the overseas countries’ intentions to build capacity in Tonga for implementation of policies, plans and programmes. Although economic and financial factors play a part in Tongans migration overseas (Ketu’u, 2014), it can also be inferred that cultural barriers also influence returning Tongan scholars to pursue careers overseas. As a result, this ‘skill migration’, hampers Tonga’s ability to retain capacity for implementing its policies, plans and programmes.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The SDGs provide opportunities for Tonga to practice good governance and engage local communities for managing ecosystem health which underpins the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. Tonga is progressing well through learning and adapting to their changing environment, despite the challenges of climate change and economic instability. The aims towards achieving SDG 13, 14,15 for enhancing ecosystem services looks to be on track as the SDGs are clearly mainstreamed in the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II and respective sectoral plans. However, practical constraints emanating from lack of understanding of sustainable development concepts compounded by political and cultural factors influencing the lack of inclusive community involvement have resulted in setbacks, impeding Tonga’s progress towards SDGs. In addition, poor operational budgets and lack of sustainable financing mechanism are also concerns that need to be addressed, if Tonga is to improve its current environmental management strategies to meet SDGs.

Moreover, the implementation of policies plans and programmes is an important part of development. An important factor for Tonga’s ability to implement its policies and plans is in understanding the behaviour of the people from a cultural perspective. The values and social norms of the Tongan culture have been highlighted in this chapter which have both positive and negative implications on environmental management. On the one hand, Tongan culture promotes growth, good relationships and social relationships which are highly regarded and upheld by most Tongans. The focus on social capital supports the way they conduct their day

to day affairs and shapes their outlook towards development. On the other hand, these same aspects of the Tongan culture can also be limiting factors in their development. It is therefore important that the Tongan government considers these cultural factors when developing environmental protection strategies and policies, if it is to achieve the theme of the SDGs 'Leave no one behind'. It seems reasonable to conclude that exploring effective approaches to enhance dialogue and address cultural and communication barriers among the people within all hierarchical levels may bring Tonga closer to success in transforming its world by 2030.

## **4 Research Methods**

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This chapter describes the approach of the study and the rationale behind the specific methods selected to achieve the four objectives of the study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the focus of the research and the rationale behind the single case study approach. This is followed by a description of the theoretical framework and methods used in the study. Methodological challenges encountered in the study and how they were addressed are also discussed towards the end of the chapter.

## 4.1 Introduction

The approach of this study was based on the concepts of sustainable development, SEA theory and institutional theory. These concepts formed the structure and guided the study around understanding current policy planning processes in Tonga for achieving SDGs in order to gauge areas where SEA might be helpful towards achieving the SDGs. An overview of the theoretical framework of the study which enabled the development of sustainability evaluation criteria and SEA Performance criteria for data analysis, is provided. The data collection methods comprising document analysis and key informant interviews are also discussed. Collecting secondary data entailed a review of policy planning documents, statistical data and legislature of the Tongan case study with a focus on strategic action policies, plans and sectoral plans. This was to gain an understanding of the formal institutional arrangements and determine the information to be collected in the primary data stage. Key informant interviews were conducted to complement the document analysis to identify the practical challenges that could not be derived from document analysis alone. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the challenges and precautions of the methods used and how they were addressed.

## 4.2 Case Study Approach

Case studies are useful to either “test established theories” or to generate new theoretical models from exploratory or descriptive cases (Hartley, 2004; Yin, 2009). It would have been ideal to conduct this study in three countries in the Pacific, one from each of the Pacific Island Territories, Fiji (Melanesia), Tonga (Polynesia) and Kiribati (Micronesia). However, taking into account the geographical locations, master’s thesis timeframe, accessibility and other logistics in organizing field work, three case studies were not deemed feasible. Accordingly, one case study was considered most practical, yet still able to provide valuable insights. A single-case study allows the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the research topic and derive better theory by exploring the evolution of the theory being investigated (Yin, 2009). Given the nature of this research in exploring the potential of SEA and its applicability to a context that has had limited coverage by SEA scholars, a single case study was deemed most suitable and practical for the objectives of the research. A single case study would allow a more in-depth analysis of how the SDGs are being incorporated across all tiers of policies, plans and programmes to investigate where SEA would be best applied. As a recipient of the New Zealand Scholarships from Tonga, it was logical to select Tonga for the

study. Tonga presents a good case study as the country recently undertook constitutional reforms in 2010 that have influenced and changed the policy planning and decision-making processes which may have implications on the need for the SEA process. Moreover, Tonga has recently committed to reporting their progress on the SDGs to the UNDP under the Voluntary National Review (VNR) programme, hence the research topic is relatable and valuable for assistance in future VNR reporting requirements.

### 4.3 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework was developed to provide a foundation of theoretical perspectives of SEA in relation to its purpose and value in solving problems in PPP processes. This provided an understanding of the experiences of other developing countries in adopting the SEA process, which directed the approach and issues to explore in the case study. The plethora of SEA literature meant that selection criteria or ‘filter’ of the material had to be applied in order to focus only on the relevant material to meet the objectives of the study. Relevant articles were therefore selected around three main themes: 1) SEA for advancing the sustainability agenda in developing nations; 2) Sustainable development in small islands and; 3) Sustainable Development Goals. The articles examined were sourced from peer-reviewed journals. A number of text books by SEA scholars and authors were also examined to form a robust understanding of the theoretical perspectives of SEA.

The theoretical underpinnings provided valuable guidance in selecting the factors that formed the SEA Performance criteria used in the document analysis stage. They also formed the basis of the type of questions that were asked in the key informant interviews and also assisted the researcher in maintaining focus on the research from the SEA point of enquiry rather than from the perspective of solving problems in PPP processes in Tonga.

### 4.4 Research Methods

#### 4.4.1 Institutional Analysis

According to North (1990), institutions are defined as human designed constraints that structure human interaction which comprise formal constraints (eg. legislative frameworks, policy directions, constitutions) and informal constraints (norms of behaviour, conventions, self-imposed codes of conduct) and their enforcement attributes. A number of SEA scholars

have studied the role of institutional factors for the performance of environmental systems (Bina, 2008; Boyle, 1998; Slunge and Loayza, 2012) and the challenges of institutionalizing SEA in developing countries (Slunge and Tran, 2014; Wirutskulshai, Sajor and Coowanitwong, 2011). A common theme arising from these studies is the importance of understanding the interplays within and between these formal and informal constraints which influences the effectiveness of SEA practice. As such, drawing on institutional theory, a deeper analysis into the factors that affect social and human behaviour was conducted throughout the study to determine the factors that will affect SEA institutionalization in Tongan context.

Policy making and planning approaches vary, depending on different contexts, and in particular on the way a country's administration chooses to operate within their human, financial and technical capacities. In this light, a study of the formal institutions (governance structures, policy and planning documents) and the informal institutions (norms, cultural practices, traditions) were studied in Tonga. This enabled the researcher to understand the current process of not only embedding sustainability in PPPs but also learn how they are implemented in practice. The sustainability objectives of PPPs were evaluated against current practices for sustainable development to gauge where SEA can improve current practices to meet SDGs. This was carried out specifically through document analysis and key informant interviews.

### **4.4.2 Document Analysis**

A number of documents were analysed to provide understanding of the planning procedures across tiers of national planning from national to sectoral to ministerial and community levels. The websites of government agencies in Tonga were explored to find strategic plans and reports related to SDGs 13, 14 and 15. The documents were selected based on the degree of their impact towards contributing to climate action, life on land and life under water. There were a significant number of legislation, policies and plans pertaining to SDGs 13, 14 and 15 in Tonga (Appendix B). Given that the focus of the research is on the policy and planning processes, the documents selected were those that contributed directly to the targets and indicators under SDGs 13, 14 and 15 were analysed. As such the legislation (Acts and regulations) that stipulate how to implement the policies and plans were assessed but not subjected to the sustainability and SEA evaluation criteria. The author suggests that research that focuses on the implementation of policies, plans and programmes could be the next phase

of this study.

Table 4 provides a list of national and sectoral plans assessed for their sustainability credentials to determine if sustainable development is a clear goal that Tonga is working towards and is reflected in the policies, plans and programmes pertaining to SDGs 13, 14 and 15. The responsible Ministries for each policy and plan are identified to provide a systematic and holistic picture of the Tongan decision making and planning context at the national strategic level. This was the first step to understanding the institutional arrangements, tiering and coordination among Ministries involved in SDG implementation.

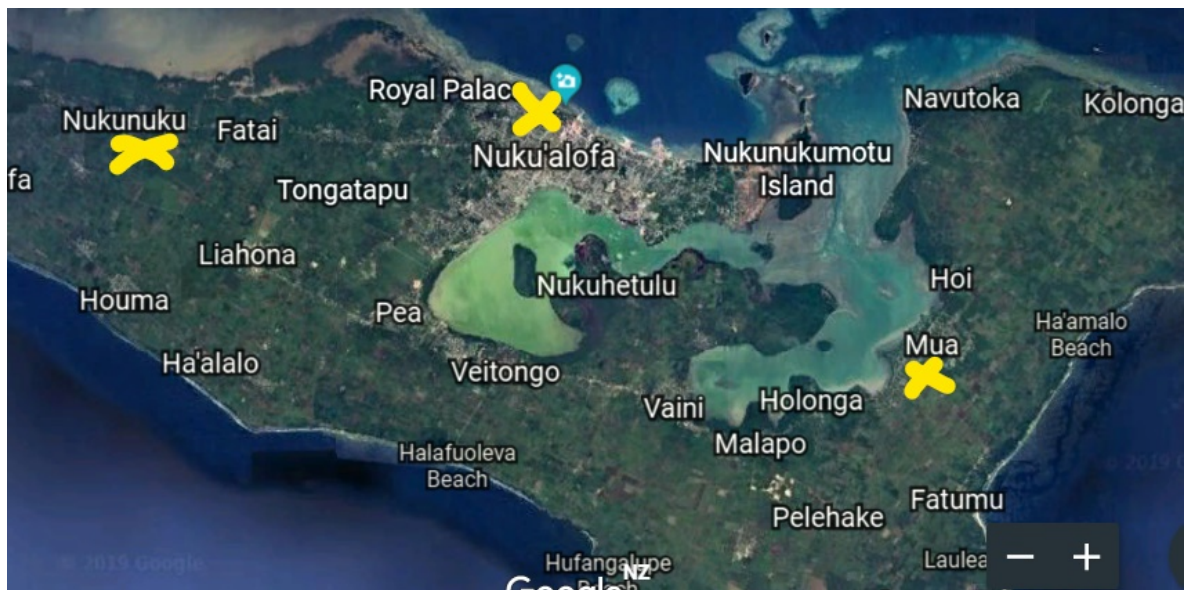
*Table 4: List of Documents Relevant to SDGs 13, 14, 15 in Tonga*

<b>National Planning Documents</b>	<b>Responsible Ministry/ Agency</b>
Climate Change Policy 2016	MEIDECC
Tonga Strategic Development Framework II	MOFNP/PMO
Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Management	MEIDECC
National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (draft)	MEIDECC
Tonga Fisheries Sector Plan	MOF
Tonga Agricultural Sector Plan	MAFF

#### 4.4.3 Key Informant Interviews

This research comprised a fieldwork component to collect the primary data for the study. A research permit was acquired to conduct key informant interviews in Tonga as per the University of Otago's ethical requirements. The fieldwork was conducted mostly in the central business district (CBD) of Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga, as most of the government offices and businesses are located within the CBD vicinity. A few locations were also chosen outside the CBD in order to determine the extent of community consultation in the policy planning processes in Tonga (see figure 4). Due to the researcher not being a Tongan speaker, a research assistant was recruited to assist with interpretation during interviews with community representatives.



*Figure 4: Field work sites*

*Source: Google earth*

Key informant interviews involve a verbal exchange of information about events, experiences or opinions to confirm or validate data and are a good source of primary data collection to add value and information to institutional and document analysis findings (Bidstrup & Hansen, 2014; Kitchin and Nate, 2000). Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a semi-structured interview approach was taken. A semi-structured interview allowed flexibility in drawing out the perceptions of sustainable development of respondents and to gain insight into the practical aspects of incorporating and implementing the SDGs and more specifically the problems in the current regime. The semi-structured form was designed to allow participants to elaborate on the issues they found challenging in policy and planning processes that could be not identified in the document analysis alone. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were deemed necessary to complement the information derived from the document analysis and also help to elucidate the norms, traditions and social behavioural issues that constitute the informal institutions.

A number of questions were prepared to guide the interviews (Appendix D). The interview questions were framed around three main parts. The first, was around exploring current policy, planning development processes and problems encountered in its development. This involved an initial step of establishing whether sustainability principles and SDGs were well understood by the participants. This was to address a concern in the SEA literature that sustainability goals in planning are not well executed in practice due to variable perceptions of

the concepts of sustainability among planners, SEA practitioners, government stakeholders and the general public (White and Noble, 2013, Polido et al., 2018 and Alshukwait, 2005). The SDGs provide a useful platform and reference point to assess the current status of sustainability practices and what actions might need to be changed in order to meet sustainability targets. It was therefore crucial to investigate the perceptions of sustainability and the understanding of SDGs among stakeholders involved in integrating SDGs into Tongan PPPs.

The second part of the interview involved gauging participants understanding of SEA. This was to determine whether SEA or elements of SEA are already practiced in policy, planning processes in Tonga. This was an important area to understand, as SEA can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from normal strategic planning processes. The participants were given a short description of the SEA concept and asked if such practices were already being undertaken as part of their policy and plan setting process. The last part of the interview aimed to identify potential barriers for introducing the SEA process. This required participants to share their views and experiences when new processes or policy tools were introduced and would thus indicate the potential barriers from the local perspective for institutionalizing SEA. The participants were also asked about their views on how policy and planning processes could be improved. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked if they had any thoughts or questions pertaining to the research to allow them to elaborate on questions they felt they could add more to.

The semi-structured interviews with key informants from a number of government departments, non-government, businesses and communities were conducted over a 2-week period in July 2019. Table 5 provides the full list of informants for the research. Given that the SEA process is administered by governments, most of the key informants were selected from key Ministries directly involved in environmental sustainability objectives of the TSDf II. A number of informants were also selected from NGOs, the business sector, communities as well as development partners in order to get a broad understanding of the coordination and cooperation among stakeholders in relation to implementing the SDGs. Invitation emails to participate in the interviews were sent to half of the informants a week prior to departing New Zealand. Notwithstanding their busy schedules, most of the informants agreed to be interviewed. However, participants from a few of the selected organizations for the study could not participate in the interviews. Despite follow up emails, calls and visits to their offices, they expressed regret that it was a very busy time and no one was available for the interview.

Nevertheless, the information captured from the interviews was informative and valuable in answering the objectives of the study.

Moreover, the fieldwork schedule coincided with the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development that was convened in New York, 8-19<sup>th</sup> July. This meant that some of the decision makers could not be interviewed. Nevertheless, there were resourceful people that provided valuable information on their role in the formulation of the Tonga VNR report on SDG implementation which was useful. In addition, the responses from those who were interviewed adequately addressed the scope of the information that was sought for the research. All interview sessions were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and their preference for anonymity was also noted. To protect their identity, the key informants were coded.

*Table 5: List of Key Informants Interviewed*

	Key Informants	Organization	Role
<i>Government 1 (G1): Mandate directly linked to ecosystem management</i>			
1	G1P1*	Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry	CEO
2	G1P2	Ministry of Lands, Survey and Natural Resources	CEO
3	G1P3	MEIDECC	CEO
4	G1P4	MEIDECC	Director
5	G1P5	MEIDECC	Deputy Director
6	G1P6	MEIDECC	Senior Officer
7	G1P7	National Spatial Planning Authority Office	Senior Officer
8	G1P8	Ministry of Fisheries	Senior Officer
9	G1P9	Ministry of Fisheries	Senior Officer
10	G1P10	Ministry of Fisheries	Senior Policy Officer
<i>Government 2 (G2): Mandate indirectly linked to ecosystem management</i>			
11	G2P11	Ministry of Internal Affairs	Senior Officer
12	G2P12	Ministry of Infrastructure	Deputy CEO
13	G2P13	Prime Minister's Office	Senior Planner
14	G2P14	Ministry of Education and Training	Director
15	G2P15	Ministry of Education and Training	Director
16	G2P16	Ministry of Education and Training	Director
<i>Business and Development (B)</i>			
17	BP17	Tonga Power Limited	Strategic Development Manager
18	BP18	Tonga Business Enterprise Centre	CEO

19	BP19	Asian Development Bank Tonga	Country Office Manager
<i>Society and Community (S)</i>			
20	SP20	Kolomotu'a	Town Officer
21	SP21	Tonga National Youth Congress	Director

The participants code:

**G1** : Government group 1 mandate directly related to ecosystem services management

**G2** : Government group 2 mandate indirectly linked to ecosystem services management

**B** : Business and development partners representative

**S** : Society and community representative

**P** : Participant.

\* the numbers correspond to participant number.

## 4.5 Data Analysis

1. **Document analysis:** A sustainability evaluation criteria was developed from the sustainability concepts based on the study by Barbier (1987) who contends that environmental, social and economic pillars of development could be reinforcing rather than conflicting each other. The documents were assessed for: 1) Social considerations pertaining to cultural and traditional considerations; 2) Economic considerations on whether the implications of the PPP on small businesses, commercial and private sector were considered and; 3) Environmental considerations to analyse if the policy or plan considered bio-physical impacts and cumulative impacts on natural resources. The documents were evaluated against these criteria and further assessed to determine the extent in which SDGs were embedded in the documents and if potential synergies and trade-offs were considered as well. The results were tabulated on an excel sheet for final refinement to the final results are presented in the results chapter.

*Table 6: Sustainability evaluation criteria*

Criterion	Evaluation questions
<i>Social Considerations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are all relevant stakeholders involved in the formulation of the PPP?</li> <li>- Are impacts on culture and traditional practices acknowledged and addressed?</li> </ul>
<i>Economic Considerations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are economic implications considered in the plan?</li> <li>- Are effects on investors and small businesses considered?</li> </ul>
<i>Environmental Considerations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are there limits or environmental perturbation acknowledged?</li> <li>- Are the impacts on the natural resources, biodiversity considered?</li> </ul>

<i>Overall assessments</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are there clear definitions for sustainable development?</li> <li>- Is there a clear alignment of SDGs from national to sectoral and corporate level?</li> <li>- Is there clear direction, guidance and provisions for achieving sustainable development relevant to SDG targets?</li> <li>- Are there clear prescriptions for responsibility and accountability mechanisms to track and monitor progress?</li> </ul>
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*Source: Barbier, (1987)*

2. **Searching for SEA elements used in planning:** A set of SEA evaluation criteria were adapted from the SEA Performance Criteria (IAIA, 2002) to identify areas where SEA elements are used to some extent in Tongan PPP processes. Given that the criteria are a general set prescribed by IAIA, the researcher selected the criteria that she deemed relevant for Tonga's context (Table 7). The full list of the SEA Performance Criteria can be found in Appendix F. Each document was analysed to determine if its development process had included elements of the criteria. As such, this exercise helped to identify the areas in which the SEA process can help to meet the challenges faced in current PPP approaches towards achieving the SDGs.

**Table 7: SEA Performance Criteria**

	<b>SEA Performance Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	<i>Is integrated</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensures an appropriate environmental assessment of all strategic decisions relevant for the achievement of sustainable development.</li> <li>- Addresses the interrelationships of biophysical, social and economic aspects.</li> <li>- Is tiered to policies in relevant sectors and where appropriate, to project EIA and decision making.</li> </ul>
2	<i>Is sustainability-led</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitates identification of development options and alternative proposals that are more sustainable.</li> </ul>
3	<i>Is focussed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provides sufficient, reliable and usable information for development planning and decision making.</li> <li>- Concentrates on key issues of sustainable development.</li> <li>- Is customized to the characteristics of the decision-making process.</li> <li>- Is Cost- and time-effective.</li> </ul>
4	<i>Is accountable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the responsibility of the leading agencies for the strategic decision to be taken.</li> <li>- Is carried out with professionalism, fairness, impartiality and balance.</li> <li>- Is subject to independent checks and verification</li> <li>- Documents and justifies how sustainability issues were taken into account in decision making.</li> </ul>

5	<i>Is participative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informs and involves interested and affected public and government bodies throughout the decision-making process.</li> <li>- Explicitly addresses stakeholder inputs and concerns in documentation and decision making.</li> <li>- Has clear information requirements and ensures sufficient access to all relevant information.</li> </ul>
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*Source: Fisher, 2002, IAIA, 2002, Verheem, 1999*

3. **Reviewing interview data:** The number of respondents and identities of research participants were grouped into 4 groups 1. Government; 2. Business and development partners; and: 3. Society. The government respondents were further divided into two sub-groups according to their level of institutional responsibility for natural resources management (direct and indirect). The responses to each of the interview questions were transcribed onto an excel sheet. Similar responses were grouped and categorised under the 3 parts of the interview to assess: 1) participants' understanding of sustainability; 2) Current practices in policy and planning processes and; 3) identify potential barriers to institutionalizing SEA. The data were subjected to a final set of responses that could be presented onto to bar graphs and pie charts to identify trends and draw conclusions on what they might mean for the research objectives. Bar graphs and pie charts illustrate the proportion of responses per question in order to provide a general understanding of the current policy planning processes and the practical challenges faced by planners, decision makers and policy makers.
  
4. **Consolidation and finalising all data sets:** This entailed the final refinement of the data which involved the development of a detailed description of each data set in relation to the theoretical insights of the study to provide answers to the research question. The responses from the participants were critically analysed to draw similarities and differences relating to experiences in other SEA literature. Based on the analysis, the factors that would most influence SEA institutionalization in Tonga were finalised to draw conclusions to the study. Relevant quotes from the participants were also carefully transcribed to ensure that the researcher interpreted participants correctly in order to illustrate their main concerns pertaining to decision-making and policy planning practices.

## **4.6 Methodological Considerations and Challenges**

### **4.6.1 Cultural and Language Barriers**

Qualitative researchers advocate the importance of understanding the different culture and professional environments of the case study locations before designing fieldwork strategy and (Martinus and Hedgcock, 2015). Caution is advised for the interview approaches with the local people. Despite having worked in Tonga for a number of years, the researcher is not of Tongan descent and thus language barriers were taken into consideration. A Research Assistant was recruited to assist in contacting town officers for an interview time and accompanying the researcher to the interview as an interpreter. However, the Research Assistant was ill during the first week of the interviews which was not anticipated and as a result, only one of the intended participants from the community was interviewed. Despite contacting other town officers for their availability, the town officers were generally hesitant and felt that they needed more time to prepare for the interview. They also requested translation of the research information sheet and the SDGs to the Tongan language which unfortunately could not be accommodated in the timeframe of the interview schedule. Therefore, the approach to communities generally requires more preparation, forethought and allowing them more time to understand what the research is about in order for them to feel comfortable to be interviewed. It is also important to note that the views of one informant cannot be used to generalize the community views of Tonga but can be regarded as indicative of the common developmental challenges faced by communities in policy planning and decision-making processes in Tonga.

### **4.6.2 Researcher's Role and Reflections**

An important caution that was emphasized prior to commencing the key informant interviews was the issue of conflict of interest. Given the researcher's past experience in impact assessment in the Tongan bureaucracy, it was made clear to the participants particularly those who were familiar with researcher's previous role in government that the interviews were for academic purposes only and to note the researcher as a postgraduate student and not as a civil servant. Furthermore, the researcher took caution not to sway or interfere with the informants' responses. This was to avoid the issue of subjectivity and bias that could influence the outcome or results of the interviews (Kitchin and Tate, 2000). However, Maxwell (2013) provides a contrasting opinion to this traditional understanding of bias and subjectivity in qualitative

research. Supported by a number of theoretical and philosophical authors (Strauss, 1987; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992), Maxwell argues that the explicit incorporation of a researcher's knowledge, identity and experience in their research will allow better insight, hypotheses and validity checks. The researcher found merit in Maxwell's assertions. Specifically, the researcher's previous role in government assisted to some extent logistically in the recruitment process and enabled the researcher to identify the organizations and key people to contact within those organizations for an interview.

In addition, the interviews also enabled better insight to the underlying problems that are key factors to how the government operates and how the people deal with development changes in response to their changing environment. For example, intergenerational conflicts and the need to allow more time for people to understand and adjust to the changes were raised in the interviews as key factors that inhibit the smooth transition to adopting and implementing new processes or strategies. While these examples demonstrate the benefits of having previous knowledge of the case study context, an important caution to note, however, is the potential or possibility of the researcher to lose focus of the purpose of the research. There is an inclination and desire for the researcher to use the research as an attempt to solve the problems encountered in her previous role in government. This may cause the researcher to lose focus and subjectivity in the research topic and therefore distort the purpose of the research in assessing the research from the SEA perspective. It is for this reason, that the researcher must maintain an objective stance and remain focused on the purpose of the research to evaluate the potential of SEA to contribute to the wider knowledge base of SEA.

### 4.6.3 Generalization

A common methodological challenge discussed by SEA researchers in using case studies is the issue of generalization (Polido et al., 2014; Barr, 2006; Eales et al., 2011). This issue of generalizability is a common criticism of the case study approach (Bryman, 2012, Yin 2003). Generalizability is a term used in quantitative research by social scientists but is more commonly known as transferability in qualitative research. Baxter (2016) argues that transferability or generalizability is about the extent to which research findings can be applied to other cases of the phenomenon in question. Contrary to the common criticism that one or two case studies cannot be generalized to a wider context (Bryman, 2012), Baxter (2016) argues that generalization or transferability is indeed possible by carefully selecting case



studies and creating useful theory that is neither too abstract nor too case-specific. Hardwick, (2009) also contributes to the debate on generalization and argues that depending on the type of case study, limitations of the approach taken, can be mitigated. He states that exploratory case studies are carried out to gather and analyse foundational data to be used for more expanded research of the phenomena being explored. Moreover, he asserts that research focused on specific places can respond and contribute to the larger debate and therefore, link the local issues to the global challenges. Therefore, in light of the above, this study can be seen as an expansion of the work by Barr (2006) who investigated the role of SEA to improve project level EIA in PICs and provided the basis for research on SEA in the Pacific region. This research also contributes to the studies by Polido et al., (2014) who identified key factors to consider when formulating specific SEA procedures for small island developing countries for advancing the sustainability agenda. The researcher suggests potential expansion of this research to study the implementation of the policies, plans and programmes emanating from the SDGs 2030 Agenda in Tonga and other Pacific Island countries. Also, the perspectives from the small businesses and communities in regard to SDGs could be explored further to draw out greater insights on the underlying barriers for implementation emanating from social, cultural and traditional processes and expectations.

### 4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the impetus for a good research outcome is determined by the research strategy employed. The case study approach is deemed the most appropriate approach to ‘test’ the SEA concepts in meeting the challenges of achieving sustainability objectives of Agenda 2030 in PICs. The data collection methods such as document analysis and key informant interviews are considered necessary to maximize the probability of retrieving the relevant information to effectively answer the research question. An important note to be gauged throughout the research process is the uncertainties that may arise and the importance of flexibility to accommodate change in circumstances or events that were not anticipated in the planning stage. Given the different organizational structures, cultural, social and political settings that the researcher expected to encounter throughout the research, it was imperative that a logical and systematic approach for undertaking the research was clearly defined. The research methods proposed were thus designed and critically appraised and deemed practical for collecting data as well guiding the data analysis conducted in the next chapter.

## **5 Results: Institutional Analysis**

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This chapter presents the results of the study, specifically, the document analysis findings and key informant interviews in relation to the current institutional structure and practices in policy planning for SDGs. The chapter is divided into 2 sections. The first section focuses on the formal institutions through document analysis of relevant policies and plans in Tonga pertaining to SDGs. The second entails a detailed description of the informal institutions through analysis of the key informant interviews.

## 5.1 Analysis of Formal Institutions: Document Analysis


The study found that sustainable development is explicitly embedded in the TSDF II and integrated also into the overarching action plans as well as the sector plans. Table 9 shows the results of the 6 documents analysed against sustainability criteria explained in chapter 4. Overall, most of documents have very clear sustainable development definitions and targets for the specific SDG goal that they contribute to. that the implications of the economic, social and biophysical environment is mentioned but not assessed specifically. The analysis shows for SDG 13, climate change is clearly integrated and mainstreamed into the main TSDF II and activities to further support its alignment to sectoral and community development plans are clearly defined in the JNAP II. In regard to SDG 14 to enhance coastal protection and increase resilience for healthy and productive oceans, the linkages with how this sector can support and achieve climate change targets are clearly defined and established in the TSDF II, JNAP II. For SDG 15 on integrating biodiversity into policies, plans and programmes, there is recognition of this in the agricultural sector plan to support resilience of crops. The TSDF II and JNAP II also acknowledge the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem management.

Overall, the policies and plans show extensive sustainability considerations, and the strategies to mobilise resources are well developed. Stakeholders involved in the formulation process are acknowledged and appears to have been well coordinated among ministries. However, the documents state the need to strengthen and support the participation of marginal groups such as the elderly members of society, women and others to improve policy planning processes. A notable concern expressed in each document is the influence of the international development assistance in the formulation of such PPPs. As such, caution was advised in the documents to ensure that the needs of the country are addressed. There was also emphasis on good governance and highlighting transparency in the planning processes is mentioned in all the documents. The strong recognition of strengthening international and regional cooperation, indicates Tonga's reliance on the international community to assist with their policy, planning and programming processes. A key note from the document analysis is that all documents do not fully account for social, environmental and economic implications that are emerging from SDG processes. As such, mechanisms to raise the awareness and understanding of such implications is needed to improve this weakness in the policy and planning process.

**Table 9: Integration of Sustainable Development Goals from Global to National and Sectoral Plans, Policies and Programmes in Tonga**

Global		<b>SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact</b> Target: Integrate climate change into national policies and planning					
	Policy/Plan/Programme	Ministry responsible	Clear objectives for sustainable development	Social, environmental and economic implications	Tiering: Clear linkages with relevant sectors/projects	Inclusiveness: Stakeholder engagement	International/ Regional Cooperation and Support
National	Climate Change Policy	MEIDECC	S	M	S	S	S
	Tonga Strategic Development Framework II	PMO	S	M	S	S	M
	Joint National Action Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management II	MEIDECC	S	M	S	S	S
	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan	MEIDECC	S	M	S	M	S
Sectoral	Fisheries Sector Plan	MOF	S	M	S	S	S
	Agriculture Sector Plan	MAFF	S	M	S	S	S
Global		<b>SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development</b> Target: By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans					
	Relevant Policy/Plan/Programme	Ministry responsible for formulation	Clear objectives for SDG targets	Recognition of social, environmental and economic	Clear linkages with relevant sectors	Stakeholder engagement	International Cooperation Support

## Chapter 5: Results: Institutional Analysis

				implications			
National	Tonga Strategic Development Framework II	PMO	S	M	S	S	S
	Joint National Action Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management II	MEIDECC	S	M	S	S	S
	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan	MEIDECC	M	M	M	M	M
Sectoral	Fisheries Sector Plan	MOF	S	M	S	M	S
Global		<b>SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems , sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss</b> Target: By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts					
National	Tonga Strategic Development Framework II	PMO	S	M	S	M	S
	Joint National Action Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management II	MEIDECC	S	M	S	S	S
	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan	MEIDECC	S	M	M	M	S
Sectoral	Agriculture Sector Plan	MAFF	M	M	M	S	S

**Key:** S – strong, M- medium, W- weak

The second stage of document analysis involved the analysis of the 6 selected documents against a simplified generic SEA Performance criteria adapted from the IAIA 2002. Table 10 illustrates that 5 elements of SEA are to some extent being used in the PPP processes in Tonga. The main finding for the first element on integration is that there is no evidence of environmental assessment of strategic decisions for sustainable development, let alone for SDGs. The climate change policy does not recognize EIA as a mechanism to inform projects that will be implemented to fulfil its objectives. This suggests a lack of understanding and tiering between the strategic actions of policy and planning. In regard to the second element on identifying development options and alternatives that are more sustainable, most plans identified viable options for achieving the plan targets, but did not describe whether the options were the most sustainable, and the logic behind choosing the best option.

When assessing the third element on how focussed the documents were on achieving sustainable development, there was no evidence of how planning and policy approaches were tailored to characteristics of current decision-making processes. This supports the need for a well-defined approach for integrating SEA in Tonga's policy and plan making processes. Most of the information to support decision making is derived from workshop meeting discussions but some were not enough in that not all views from stakeholders were captured to effectively address all development concerns. The main finding for the fourth element on accountability clearly indicates the need for verification and independent checks on the policy and plan to ensure that all sustainability concerns including the wider implications on health and culture, are accounted for. There is also a need for justification on how the sustainability considerations were included in decision making.

Finally, when the documents were analysed against the last SEA element for participative approaches, most methods in the documents described how the planners and policy makers went about their stakeholder consultations and listed the groups and organisations, that were consulted for its development. A key recommendation in each document stated the need for more participants to take part in the consultative process. In particular, the representatives from marginalised groups such as the elderly people, those from remote communities and the women in the communities should be more involved. Overall, these results indicate that there are elements of SEA in practice in Tonga but may need to be strengthened and reinforced with the formal use of the SEA process itself.

*Table 8: An Assessment of Tongan Policies and Plans Against SEA Performance Criteria*

Criteria	Tonga Strategic Development Framework II	Joint National Action Plan II	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan	Tonga Fisheries Sector Plan	Tonga Agriculture Sector Plan	Climate Change Policy
<b>Is Integrated</b>						
Ensures appropriate environmental assessment of all strategic decisions relevant for achieving sustainable development.	N	N	N	N	N	N
Addresses the interrelationships of biophysical, social and economic aspects.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Is tiered to policies in relevant sectors and, where appropriate, to project EIA and decision making.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
<b>Is sustainability-led</b>						
Facilitates identification of development options and alternative proposals that are more sustainable.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Is focused</b>						
Provides sufficient, reliable and usable information for development planning and decision making.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Concentrates on key issues of sustainable development.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Is customized to the characteristics of the decision making process.	N	N	N	N	N	N

## Chapter 5: Results: Institutional Analysis

Is cost- and time-effective.	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
<b>Is accountable</b>						
Is the responsibility of the leading agencies for the strategic decision to be taken.	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Is carried out with professionalism, rigor, fairness, impartiality and balance.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Is subject to independent checks and verification	N	N	N	N	N	N
Documents and justifies how sustainability issues were taken into account in decision making.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Is participative</b>						
Informs and involves interested and affected public and government bodies throughout the decision making process.	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Explicitly addresses stakeholder inputs and concerns in documentation and decision making.	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Has clear, easily-understood information requirements and ensures sufficient access to all relevant information.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓

**Key :** ✓✓✓ – Strong, ✓✓ – Moderate, ✓ – Low, N – not evident

*Source: Adapted from IAIA 2002*



## 5.2 Analysis of Informal Institutions: Key Informant Interviews

### 5.2.1 Perception of Sustainable Development and SDGs in Tonga

One of the challenges for achieving sustainability is the variety of definitions, interpretations and understanding of the term sustainable development. Hence, it was important to gauge the understanding of the term among government officials, representatives from the business sector and the community leaders. Accordingly, the key informants were asked what sustainable development meant to them. In figure 5, 11 of the participants (52 percent) acknowledge that sustainable development is about managing their natural resources wisely to safeguard their future. The majority of respondents from government have a better grasp of the meaning of sustainable development in terms of environmental management.

*“Sustainable Development refers to proper use of our land and resources. Tonga is not as rich as our neighbours and our resource base is quite limited so I think it’s important that we use our land resources wisely and responsibly and also monitor those who use our natural resources because it is our responsibility to use our resources wisely.” (GIP2)*

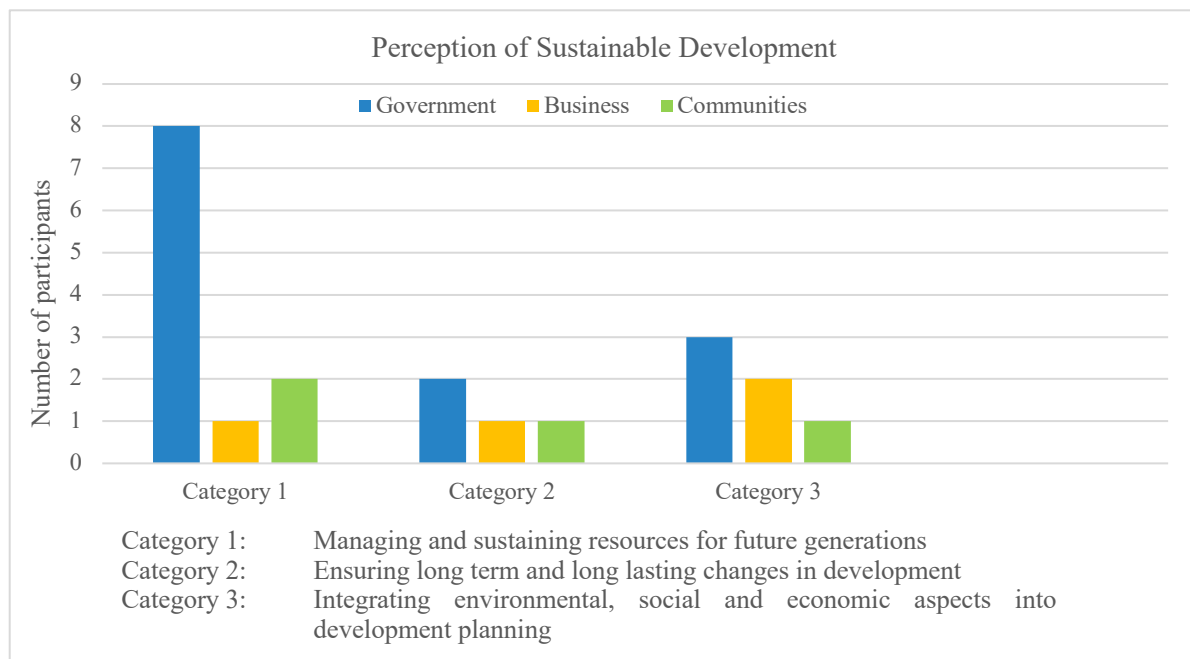
In category 2, 4 of the respondents (19 percent) understood it more in terms of sustainable business, meaning long lasting or long-term viability of the business. The remaining 6 respondents (29 percent) understood sustainable development as about incorporating the three pillars of environmental, social and economic aspects in development planning.

*“Sustainable development to me, means all aspects are included in development, that is the social, political, economic and environmental impacts and aspects should be incorporated in any kind of development. Also in Tonga, the cultural impacts should be taken into consideration as it is an essential part of our life here” (GIP7)*

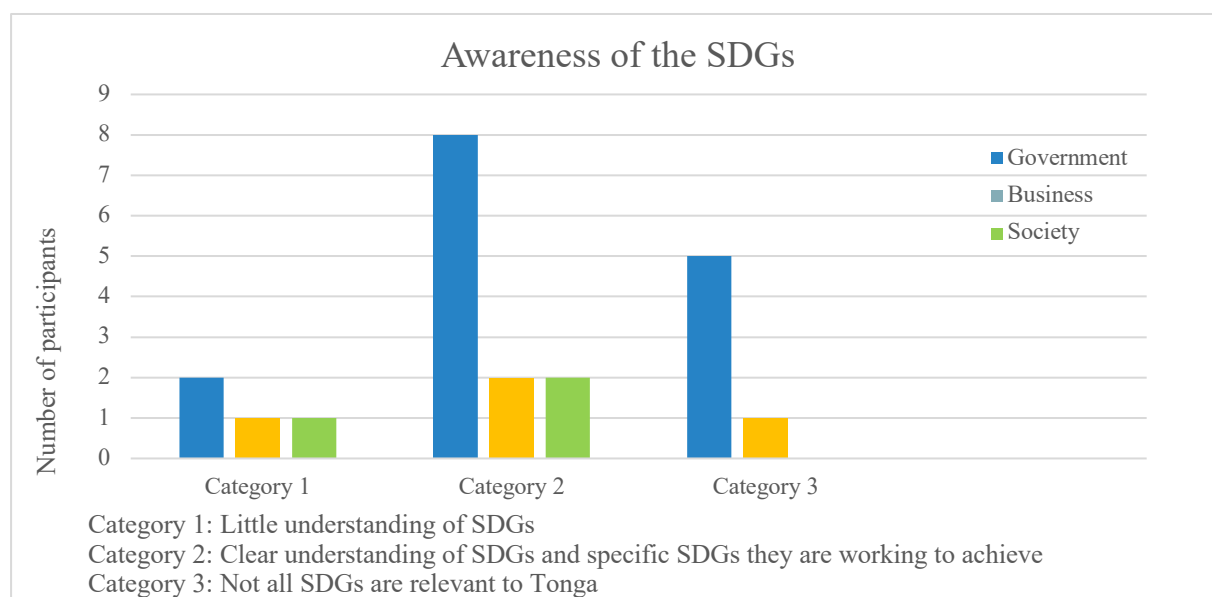
When asked about the role of responsibility for sustainable development, all participants agreed that sustainable development is everyone’s responsibility and no one Ministry or department should be responsible for it. This indicates that there is a common understanding of responsibility among all groups for achieving sustainability in terms of

environmental protection. However, there are some respondents from the small businesses that are not well versed with sustainability in terms of environmental protection and ecosystem management. This supports the need for stronger awareness and engagement by government with small businesses in order to achieve a collective understanding of what sustainable development means in Tonga. The researcher believes that this is critical in order to ensure that collective efforts are aiming to achieve the same goals recognized under the SDGs.

**Figure 5: Perception of Sustainable Development among Key Informants**



Much like the understanding of the concept of sustainable development, it was important to determine to what extent the SDGs were understood by the key informants. Given that the main goal of the SDGs is ‘leaving no one behind’, the researcher feels that this is especially critical for a nation like Tonga where decisions are sometimes made without thorough consultations with all those concerned for development. The key informants were thus asked if they were aware of the SDGs and to share their views on the importance and practicality of the SDGs, and whether their organisations were incorporating them into their plans, policies and programmes. Figure 6 shows the responses from the participants under three main categories. The first category shows that only four of the respondents (19 percent) were not well versed with SDGs and felt the need for more awareness and understanding of what the SDGs are and its implications for development. In the second category, 12 of the respondents (57 percent) were well aware of the SDGs and felt that they were explicitly incorporated into their policies and plans.

**Figure 6: Awareness of SDGs Among Key Informants**

In category three, 6 of the participants (24 percent) mentioned that they were involved in the country's SDGs progress report as part of the country's commitment to present its progress on the SDGs under the Voluntary National Review Programme at the high-level political forum held in New York. As such, these respondents had a higher understanding of the SDGs and the practicality of achieving the SDGs for Tonga. About half of these respondents (24 percent) believed that not all SDGs would be relevant to a small country like Tonga and that governments should be selective in the targets they wanted to achieve and not necessarily have to achieve all of them.

*"Everyone agreed to a number of SDGs but to me it doesn't mean that they all apply to Tonga so in terms of reporting, due to limitations of resources, it would make sense to either prioritise the SDGs or just integrate the SDGs into current reporting systems like for reporting requirements for the conventions we are acceded to" (G1P4)*

Moreover, a critical factor raised by some of the respondents, was the need to translate the SDGs into the local language for the local people at the grassroots level. This is especially critical to encourage and enhance community understanding of SDG targets to support their involvement for achieving SDGs.

*"It is very important that we have a national understanding of what the SDGs are and therefore we need to have one translation of the SDGs into the Tongan*

*language that can be understood by everyone because at the end of the day its about leaving no one behind” (GIP2)*

From the interviews, the synergies between sectors were also highlighted by some of the decision makers. For example, agricultural solutions were being explored and introduced to address the health problems in Tonga. This demonstrates that there is sectoral coordination in relation to achieving the SDGs.

*“Obesity is a national crisis now in Tonga. The solution to this problem is to empower and support local farmers to expand their production. We introduced a resilient agricultural system that incorporates traditional and modern farming methods to help their crops survive cyclones and drought. This helps to reduce reliance and consumption of imported foods and also helps to address the health problem.” (GIP1)*

Some participants also expressed appreciation of the SDGs in that it gave a sense of purpose and empowerment to the communities in the knowledge that their work was contributing to the wider global community. This is an important recognition that demonstrates that SDGs are to some extent achieving their purpose for encouraging collective effort towards achieving global sustainability.

*“SDGs makes our young people feel important and pulls our work together. The SDGs empowers our work with the communities because our small work here contributes to the big overall plan worldwide”(SP21)*

Overall, the understanding of SDGs is more prominent in government agencies and the NGOs who have been involved in reporting process for the Voluntary National Review for reporting Tonga’s SDGs progress to the United Nations. The agencies supported by international development assistance such as the representatives from business and development group are also well versed with SDGs. However, the communities are not fully aware of the SDGs and its implications on their community development plans. This demonstrates the need for government to strengthen awareness programmes to increase the understanding of SDGs to support inclusive involvement of communities and small businesses for achieving the SDGs.

## 5.2.2 Current Processes in Policy and Planning

### I. Participatory Approaches in Policy Planning

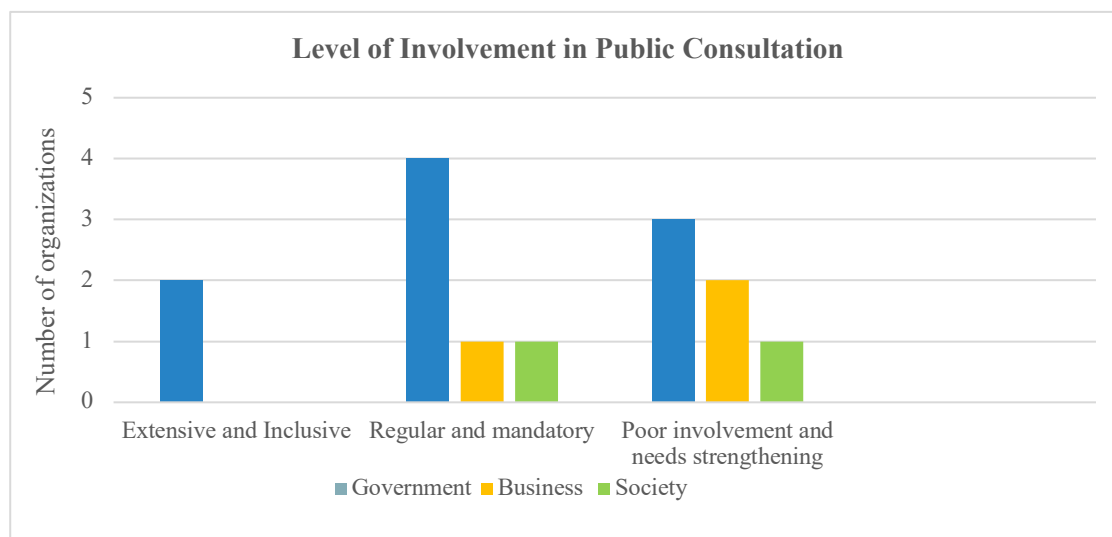
The participants were asked about their views on their organization's practice in consulting other departments, business, NGOs and the communities when formulating their policies, plans and programmes. This was to gauge the extent of public consultation and determine the strengths and weaknesses of communication among stakeholders in relation to development planning. Figure 7 shows a division of responses from the key informants. Most respondents, particularly from government organizations, felt that they conducted sufficient consultation with their stakeholders and met regulatory requirements. For example, according to participant G1P5 who is directly involved in ecosystem and natural resource management in relation to climate change and disaster risk management, their organisation had learnt from past experiences in their participatory approaches prior to 2006 and were more inclusive in their current planning approaches. This minimised duplication of work and enhanced replication based on success stories. However, according to participant G1P5, what was lacking in their approach was a coordinating mechanism to ensure knowledge and information dissemination. As such, the Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management Secretariat was established.

*“In 2006, it was always at government level that decisions were made and this is referred to as horizontal integration. In 2009, Tonga was one of the first in adopting a horizontal and vertical approach at the same time. The vertical approach was getting information from community level to government and the horizontal approach meant integration across all line ministries” (G1P5)*

However, a few government respondents acknowledged that public involvement is important but that they had not conducted effective consultation with their stakeholders and recognized that their efforts needed improvement and strengthening. For instance, respondent G2P12 explained that their organisation's planning process lacked the input from the private sector which was attributed to the timeline given to them from the Division of National Planning Office under the Office of the Prime Minister. The respondent indicated that they need more time to engage effectively with the private sector to get their feedback to help further implement their plans. The views of G2P12 are shared with other respondents (G2P16, BP18, SP20) who also indicated that they needed more time to effectively engage and obtain valuable

feedback from their stakeholders during consultation phases of their policy and planning development processes. This illustrates the need for a review of the timelines in policy planning and also suggests that participatory approaches and communication methods may need to be reviewed to identify areas needing improvement.

**Figure 7: Public Involvement in PPP Processes**



*“The government leaders are always rushing us. We need more time to understand what they are trying to do and what we need to do” (G2P16)*

In contrast, some of the government respondents now recognize the value of consulting their stakeholders, particularly, the private sector and communities. This helped the organization to consolidate sectoral development priorities based on their stakeholder needs, resulting in more effective utilization of their budget allocations.

*“Prior to 2016, the Ministry usually decided what to do for the sector. However, the development of the sector plan involved consultation of the communities, private businesses, exporters to get their views. This helped the Ministry to direct necessary resources according to the needs of subsistence farmers as well the commercial farmers. This also established an interactive monitoring and evaluation group called the agricultural growth committee that meets regularly to monitor the needs of the people and to determine how the Ministry can help.” (G1P1)*

Several of the key informants indicated that they would like to be more involved in consultation processes and felt that their involvement by government was often rushed and

carried out only to satisfy donor requirements and criteria for obtaining funding. These informants felt that their voices and opinions are not seriously taken into account in the planning phases. This indicates some degree of tokenistic approaches by government and donor agencies which is common in centralised planning approaches.

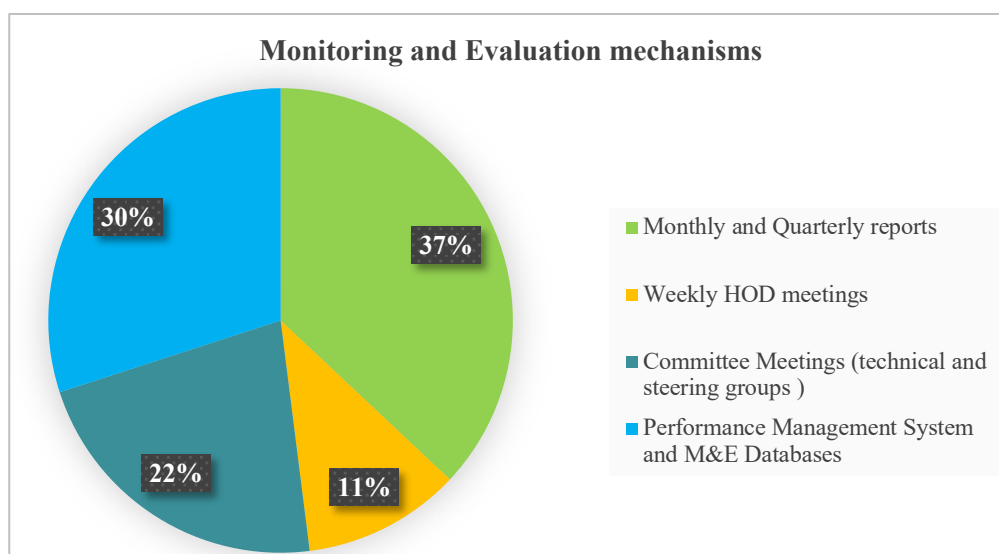
*“We feel that the government often consults us last and we are just a tick in the box for them to get donor funding” (BP18)*

*“Communication in Tonga is very poor. For example, donors need to implement their foreign aid, so they have their own criteria. However, our community needs are not aligned to their criteria, so our needs are not addressed so we need to align our community development plan to SDGs” (SP20)*

Overall, the results suggest that the use of the participatory approaches in Tonga needs to be strengthened. In particular, the government needs to involve more members of the private sector and business sector, as well as communities in their policy and planning development processes. There are also concerns over the timeframe in which consultation practices are carried out. Government and donor agencies and in particular international consultants need to allow enough time to fully engage all stakeholders particularly from the business and communities in order to encourage participation across all sectors and levels of policy and planning. This also applies between government departments, indicating a need for better coordination among all horizontal and vertical sectors for implementing the SDGs.

## II. Monitoring and Evaluation for SDGs

Monitoring and evaluation of the sustainability outcomes of policies, plans and programmes is an integral part of the development process as it determines if SDGs are achieving their targets for sustainability. A good monitoring and evaluation system would assess the progress in achieving SDG targets and therefore identify what improvements or actions may be required to achieve the goals. The key informants were asked to share the current mechanisms or tools that their organisations use to monitor and evaluate their plans, policies and programmes to track their progress for achieving the SDGs. Figure 8 illustrates the various monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that the respondents from government departments use to monitor their progress towards meeting the SDGs. About 37 percent indicated that they use monthly and quarterly reports to track their progress.

**Figure 8: Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms for achieving SDGs**

*“Our plans are monitored on a quarterly basis, where the staff in our corporate division seek feedback from other divisions and report back on their progress. We then submit our progress report to the Ministry of Finance and National Planning. The problem is we do not receive any formal feedback from them about our reports on our progress. And we need that feedback so we can know what to improve on.” (G2P12)*

About 30 percent of respondents indicated that they use performance management systems (PMS) and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) databases managed by the Public Service Commission and Division of National Planning under the Prime Minister’s office respectively. These monitoring mechanisms are often in the form of reports marked against key performance indicators aligned to the national outcomes of the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II relevant to the SDGs. This also includes evaluating the extent in which ministries are conducting consultation of stakeholders during their policy and planning processes.

*“We have a monitoring and evaluation tracker database that is updated by the staff at Planning to monitor national progress of achieving TSDF in relation to SDGs as well as corporate level” (G2P13)*

*“We have a marking criteria that assesses corporate plans against TSDF and there is a component that requires stakeholder engagement. That is how we know if*



*Ministries are conducting public consultations with the public, NGOs, private sector and businesses” (G2P13)*

In addition to the ‘hardcopy’ reporting and monitoring of progress, 22 percent of the participants also monitored progress through technical meetings conducted monthly or every 2 months and sometimes on an ad hoc basis. These meetings allow follow up and quick tracking of progress and urgent matters to be addressed in regards to meeting planned activities for SDGs. Moreover, some ministries (11 percent) have head of department (HOD) meetings that take place weekly to monitor and report on their departmental progress which is collated by the planning unit for reporting requirements to the Public Service Commission.

*“We have a planning unit that coordinates monitoring and follow up the progress of the Ministry on the TSDF, SDGs, Corporate plans, annual management plans etc. We also have a weekly meeting for head of departments every Monday where the directors and senior officials report their departmental progress” (G1P3)*

The key informants from government indicated that the effectiveness of each method of M&E varied but felt that the verbal meetings were more effective as they gave members an opportunity to raise important and urgent issues that needed to be addressed and also allowed them to follow up on progress in a timely manner.

In addition to the monitoring of SDGs, some respondents (G1P4 and G1P5), identified the challenge of meeting reporting requirements to a number of multilateral environmental agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and others (Appendix E). This becomes a cumbersome task for government. As such, according to government respondent G1P5, a monitoring and evaluation system is being developed to explore how these reporting requirements can be synergised for more effective and efficient monitoring, reporting and evaluation.

*“The main role of the National Planning Division is to monitor planning at the national level and also at the organisational level but it’s still vague as PSC holds mandate for reporting requirements from the Ministries. We need to assess these reports from the ministries to monitor their progress of achieving the TSDF goals so we are finding ways to get those reports to us. This will help us see the*

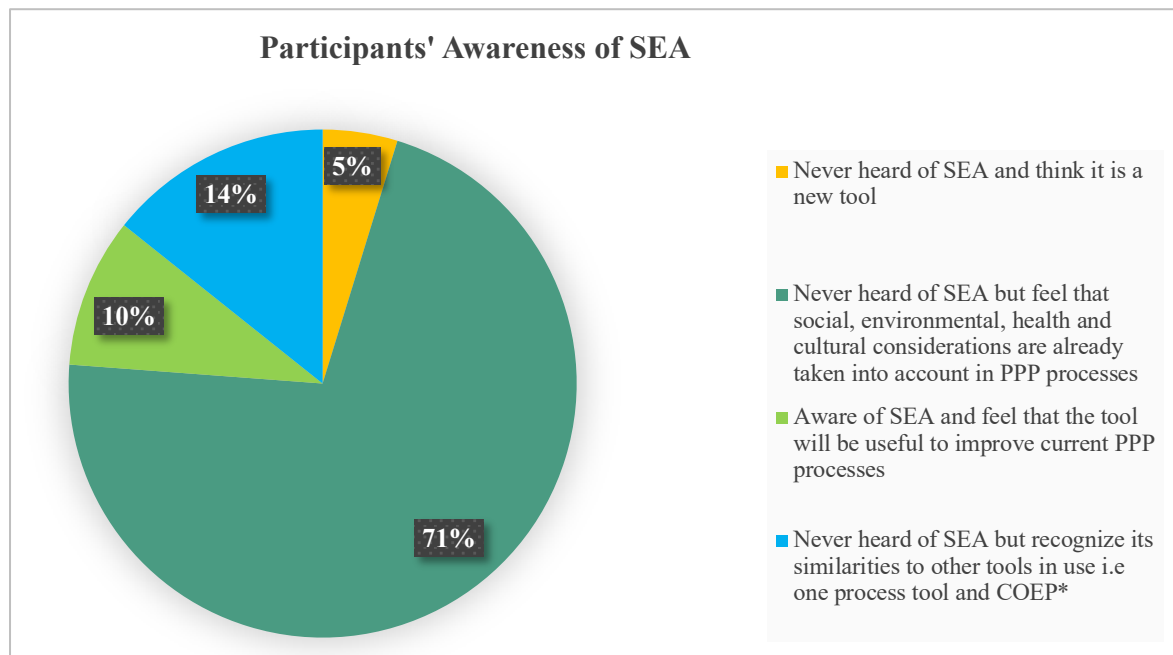
*ministries outputs in relation to the TSDF goals as well as national and global levels.”*

Overall, there appears to be a lack of a uniform reporting system that enables tracking of the progress of the national outcomes assigned to the Ministries from the National Planning Division. The current system of reporting ministries’ progress for meeting SDGs in their corporate plans, aligned to the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II, is coordinated by the Public Service Commission. However, it is the National Planning Division that is responsible for monitoring the national outcomes of the TSDF to track Tonga’s contribution to the global level. This supports the need for a tool to enable a systematic approach that will allow effective monitoring and evaluation of planning and policy progress and outcomes among and within Ministries.

### *III. Awareness of SEA in Tonga*

Assessing the awareness of SEA among government, business and society is key to this research as it will determine if the tool will be useful to the existing institutional operations. The key informants were asked if they were aware of SEA and after providing a brief explanation of the process, the researcher gauged their thoughts on similar elements of SEA already employed in current policy planning processes. Figure 9 presents the variable responses of participants’ understanding and perception of the SEA. About 10 percent of participants had heard of SEA and perceived it as an integrated planning tool but were not fully aware of the SEA concept, its purpose and benefits in PPP processes. Most participants (about 71 percent) had never heard of SEA but were familiar with EIA and were able to relate the purpose of EIA to SEA at the higher level of PPP. After a brief explanation of the SEA concept some participants felt that the tool had similar purposes to other tools that they were using but had different terminology i.e one-process tool and the Risk Resilience Tool kit used by the Ministry of Finance and National Planning for screening projects and the code of environmental practice (COEP) tool used by Tonga Power Limited. These participants felt that their current PPP processes already took into account the environmental, social safeguards as well as the health and cultural implications but needed more coordination and strengthening. This suggests that participants perceive SEA to be a strategic planning support tool and are not recognizing the real purpose of SEA in identifying impacts of their policies, plans and programmes.

**Figure 9: Awareness of SEA Among Key Informants**



*“The current planning process does to some extent consider social impacts of the plan but not specifically. It is more considered in the project level but I think it is important that it is considered in the planning and policy level” G1P1*

In regard to current processes considering cumulative impacts and impacts of their policies and plans on other sectors, some respondents identified that there were departments who undertook such processes such as Crown Law in relation to policies and plans and MEIDECC in terms of environmental impacts. However, the respondents indicated that these processes administered by one organisation often took a long time to complete, resulting in delay in approval of policies and plans for implementation.

*“The Crown Law department has the mandate for assessing policies that impinge on other policies and plans. However, over time the number of policies and plans have accrued and delayed project implementation because only one agency handles that role for the whole country. This is something that Tonga needs to sort out”(G1P5)*

Therefore, in general, the results indicate that although the concept of SEA is not well known in Tonga, some of the elements of SEA are already in practice but may need to be

strengthened. This information is crucial to determine if the SEA process will be useful to the institutions in Tonga.

### 5.2.3 Challenges and Suggestions for Improving Current Processes

#### I. *Challenges in Policy and Planning Processes*

When introducing a new system or process into any institution or country, some resistance and problems are anticipated and can be expected before the process can be fully operational. The key informants were asked about some of the problems that their organisations faced when they tried to introduce a new process or system for improving current practice for sustainability. Some of the responses from the key informants reinforced some of the hypotheses that the researcher had drawn from literature and her experience working in government. For instance, formal institutional constraints such as the lack of finances and human resources, technical capacities were highlighted by many of the informants as a barrier to effective policy and plan making as well as reporting. As such, according to G1P4 and G1P1, many ministries recruit consultants to coordinate the development of policies and plans as well as reporting requirements to multilateral environmental agreements.

*“We don’t have human resources and time to do proper reporting and planning so we hire international consultants to coordinate the reporting and planning for us. We are not the only ones, other ministries also source consultants from outside.” (G1P4)*

There were also concerns about duplication of work and the way in which international development assistance is administered in Tonga. According to one respondent, the private sector could perform some of the tasks that other departments in government ministries are doing. However, government controls the way in which funds are dispersed and this has to some extent inhibited private sector involvement in coordinating and managing some of the work to meet SDGs. Moreover, the development partners do not have any say in how the government uses donor support funding. This supports the need to introduce accountability checks and monitoring international development assistance to ensure that funding assistance is directed and used effectively for achieving the SDGs .

Table 12 shows that most of the key informants identified informal institutional constraints relating to culture, conservative ways of the Tongan people and, resistance to change as the more challenging factors they encountered when introducing new processes in policy and plan making.

**Table 9: Problems faced when introducing new processes in Tongan policy planning**

<b>Formal Institutional Constraints</b>	<b>Informal Institutional Constraints</b>
Lack of understanding of new process (need translation to local language)	Lack of political will
Lack of financial and capital support	Lack of local support (People are resistant to change)
High staff turnover	Not enough time to process and understand new concept
Lengthy channel of approval	Intergenerational conflicts (cultural)
Lack of technical support	Lack of coordination and communication
	Change in Ministerial/leadership Regime
	Power relations
	Religious beliefs

Many of the key informants identified resistance to change as the main barrier for development and adopting new initiatives. Generally, people need time to fully understand new processes in order to accept and implement the new process or tool. From the interviews, the general length of time that it takes for new processes to be fully institutionalized from the time of inception, varied between three to seven years and still some are taking more than ten years or longer to implement. For example, according to G1P5, the Climate Change Trust Fund in Tonga has taken more than 10 years since its inception in 2009 for legislation supporting its institutionalization to be passed in cabinet. In this instance, the decision makers do not fully understand the benefits of a new process, tool or proposal to improve current processes and as such progress is delayed. This is exacerbated by changing regimes and political leadership which entails re-informing and re-briefing a new Minister or Chief Executive Officer of the policy or plan proposal to gain their support and approval for its institutionalization.

*“When we tried to introduce the One Process tool to all the ministries, it was very problematic because trying to shift the mindset of Ministries to do new things is difficult. It takes time for them to shift from doing something that they are comfortable with. In addition, staff turnover is high and we have to keep training new staff in the ministries about the one process too.”(G1P4)*

In other instances, outside government, new processes fail to achieve their objectives due to poor understanding of the concept by the communities. For example, according to a respondent who works closely with communities, traditional agricultural methods are being contested against modern methods and farmers are not willing to change their traditional practices to improve current agricultural practices. This is attributed to government usually rushing consultative processes to meet timelines which often results in people not really understanding the concept and its benefits. This ultimately results in the failure of the new initiatives.

*“The problem is government don’t give us enough time. They need to do more awareness and give people time to understand. Most of the time people misunderstand and don’t understand well. If people understand, then everything will be easy to continue on” (SP20)*

*“It usually takes about 3-5 years for people to accept a new process. You need to make everyone aware about the need for the SEA. If they feel the need for it, then they will do it” (GIP1)*

Box 1 illustrates the various responses of participants from the government when they try to introduce new processes to improve their planning and policy making processes as well as the means to implement them.

***Box 1: Example of responses to question on the problems faced when introducing new processes and tools in policy and planning processes***

*“We receive a lot of support from development partners which meet the needs of the region but sometimes does not really meet the needs for Tonga” (GIP1)*

*“Introducing innovation into our current system is problematic because it deals with changing attitudes, morale of staff, lack of resources and sometimes the political environment all contribute to the challenges we face when we try to be innovative” (GIP3)*

*“Change management, political will, awareness and communication are some of the biggest challenges we face when we try to introduce a new process.” (BP17)*

Another concern that was raised by G1P1 and G2P3 is the setbacks to their ministry's progress on conservation of biodiversity and sustainable agriculture, when cyclones destroy and damage natural resources. Responses to these natural disasters sometimes include the introduction of interventions in the form of policies or action plans. Such plans also need to be assessed for their implications on sustainability progress but are often rushed to address urgent issues such as community displacement, flooding etc. This may require a 'quick' SEA process to ensure that problems are avoided when such response plans are carried out.

*"We have many plans but if we don't have the financial resources to implement them then we fall short of meeting our goals and targets. Also, we have the problems of recovery after cyclones that sometimes puts our work on hold and delays our progress."(G1P3)*

Overall, the informal institutions in Tonga are bigger obstacles to development than the formal institutions. This implies that despite best efforts from the government and development partners to instigate positive change and improve current policy and planning processes, the extent to which such initiatives serve their purpose will be undermined by the majority of the people if they are not given time to understand the purpose of the new processes for change. Accordingly, the results suggests the need for a mechanism that will enable more time to facilitate coordination and support meaningful communication approaches and awareness strategies, within government, as well as with other stakeholders.

## II. *Improving National Processes*

Recognizing challenges to current development progress provides opportunities for planners and decision makers to explore opportunities for improvement. The participants were asked if they had any views or suggestions for improving current processes towards achieving SDGs. Box 2 provides suggestions from respondents for improving resource mobilisation particularly budget allocations, awareness and capacity building of SDGs and coordinative mechanisms among all stakeholders. In addition, mechanisms for accountability and a systematic method of monitoring and evaluating progress also need improvement.

*"We need to develop a consolidated mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of our performance against our plans. The current reporting system is fragmented and duplicating a lot of work and using up time that can be used doing*

*technical work but instead we spend a lot time meeting reporting requirements to various Ministries”*

Moreover, some respondents from the community (SP20) and government (G1P1) emphasized that new processes should take into account the way of life of Tongan people and the donor agencies should understand the real challenges faced by the communities and small businesses. This suggests the importance of introducing a ‘Tongan approach’ or a flexible process that can be tailored to suit the characteristics of decision making and ensure that consultations with stakeholders outside of government are inclusive and conducted in a meaningful way.

***Box 2: Responses to question about participants’ views on improving current policy and planning processes***

*“SDGs are important and very critical part of our planning now. The Planning Division under the Prime Minister’s Office should conduct a workshop for planners from all ministries to explain what the SDGs are and establish coordinative mechanisms to meet the goals.” (G2P12)*

*We need more budget for operation as well as human technical resources. MAFF’s mandate is to provide more healthy food for the locals that can combat health problems related to NCDs and therefore take pressure off the Health Ministry”(G1P1)*

*“Leadership and Management is important and following the right channel to introduce the SEA process. Legislation can also be useful to make everyone follow.” (G1P10)*

*“Positive attitudes and people who have confidence and the will power to solve problems is also important for our progress” (G1P3)*

*“The Prime Minister’s office should make it a requirement for Ministries to go out to their private sectors and operators to get their views during planning stage and give us time to be able to do this and they should monitor us to make sure we are doing the consultations”(G2P12)*

*“When you are a new entity, political support, education and awareness is important to help leaders understand what you’re trying to do to improve and make changes to the system” (G1P7)*



The importance of leadership and positive attitudes related to culture, human behaviour and values were also suggested as important for improving current practices for achieving the SDGs. As political leaders change, so do the priorities of development, depending on the new governments views for development. This can either worsen or alleviate existing development challenges for achieving SDGs. As such, this supports the need for decision-makers to be aware of the principles of sustainable development and understand the implications of their decisions that inform the development of policies and plans for achieving the SDGs. The potential role of SEA for improving such processes is explained in the next chapter.

## 6 Discussion

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This chapter explains the meaning of the results based on the theoretical insights and the context of Tonga in relation to its developmental challenges. The data from the key informant interviews complement some of the key arguments of the study to form the final set of factors for Tonga to consider for SEA uptake. Major challenges are discussed, specifically the role of culture and the political influences (internal and external) that shape development priorities in Tonga. The researcher believes that such influences are intrinsic for the way decisions and development planning are conducted in Tonga and therefore ultimately will influence the potential role of SEA for sustainable planning in Tonga for SDGs and beyond.

## 6.1 Sustainability Considerations in Tonga's Policy Planning Processes

This study has found that the degree of sustainability and sustainable development considerations in policy planning documents varies across the tiers of strategic actions but appears robustly embedded in the main guiding documents for development (Appendix C). The word sustainability and 'sustainable development' and its definitions were found in the main guiding framework for Tonga in the TSDF II and emphasized in the overarching strategic action plans JNAP II and the NBSAP. The sectoral plans also highlight the importance of sustainable development and the significance of managing and restoring natural resources for future generations. The extensive awareness of sustainability can be attributed to the lessons learnt from implementing the previous strategic action plans aimed at achieving the targets under the Millennium Development Goals, in particular Goal 7 which focused on achieving environmental sustainability (MDG report 2015).

Many of the projects that were implemented to achieve goal 7 of the MDGs required international assistance through development partners (multilateral and bilateral donor agencies) such as ADB, Word Bank etc. These donor agencies promote sustainability and the use of sustainable development tools such as SEA, EIA, social and environmental safeguards, risk assessment, etc., as part of the financial assistance application and project implementation processes. This suggests that the extensive awareness and recognition of sustainability principles and strategies for achieving development in Tonga can be attributed to the combination of the global pressures and donor agencies to increase sustainability which are directly and indirectly linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), SDGs and other multilateral environmental agreements. Hence, the drive for sustainable development appears to have come largely from outside, rather than within, Tonga. This raises questions around who drives change, what purposes are intended, whose interests are served, and ultimately, who benefits. The answers to these questions, when critically examined against the real needs and problems faced by the government, business and society can thus reveal the underlying problems that may affect and potentially undermine Tonga's national efforts for achieving the SDGs.

## 6.2 Drivers of Change in Tonga

The TSDF II was largely formulated by an extensive review of TSDF I and the MDG report 2015. With the support of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the draft SDGs in 2015 were also integrated into the main national outcomes of the TSDF II. As such, it can be assumed that the sustainability agenda in Tonga is strongly influenced by the international agreements that it acceded to, under the various conventions underpinned by the United Nations. Tonga acknowledges the support of its bilateral and multilateral development partners for their assistance in helping its efforts to achieve sustainable development but also recognize that its interests are not always in line with that of their development partners (TSDF II). This poses a potential threat to Tonga's sovereignty and resonates with the studies by Richardson & Cashmore, (2011) and Axelsson et al., (2012) who assert that development partners such as the World Bank, may be exerting their development agenda without fully recognizing and understanding the critical needs of the country. According to Axelsson et al., (2012), the World Bank promotes the participatory aspect of policy SEA as a mechanism to effectively engage stakeholders as a tool for good governance. However, SEA literature illustrates that the principles and methods for participatory approaches when applied in developing countries are not always effective in practice. This is because cultural and socio-political dimensions are often not fully understood when designing participatory approaches to apply in the PPP formulation phase (Boyle 1999, Morgan, 1998, Bina 2008), which is also true in the case of Tonga.

In the key informant interviews, the representatives from the community and private sector including the business sector felt that their participation in policy planning processes was often rushed and only to fulfil donor requirements. In contrast, most of the representatives from the government agencies felt that they had sufficiently consulted the public communities for the purposes of designing and endorsing a plan or policy. This discrepancy can be the result of the way policy and planning processes are conducted. The TSDF II, the JNAP II, NBSAP and sectoral plans were formulated through the financial support of international agencies who normally engage an international consultant to coordinate the formulation of the policy, plan or programme. Accordingly, the participatory approaches employed in the formulation processes are normally workshops organized by the particular Ministry that will be responsible for the implementation of the PPP. However, in these workshop settings the views of the most

prominent and outspoken people from the communities and small businesses are often captured. This suggests that the views of the marginalized groups, such as elderly people, non-government organisations, small business representatives and women groups who might be affected by the PPP, are not heard. In many cases, international consultants are not aware of the cultural protocols and the social hierarchy that restricts many representatives at the workshop from freely expressing their views. In addition, these consultants work within a timeframe that can result in a rushed consultation process. Consequently, it is difficult to obtain the views of all affected groups and individuals. The reliance on international firms and consultants to facilitate policy and planning formulation process, reduces the ability of Tonga to take full ownership and accountability for formulating its future PPPs. This can therefore, undermine implementation once the policy, plan or programme is endorsed. If Tonga is to adopt SEA, it will be important to recognize these barriers to effective participation which is a crucial element of SEA facilitating inclusiveness in the formulation of policies, plans and programs to achieve the SDGs. Accordingly, building the capacity of local consultants to identify these communication barriers may also help to address the cultural barriers impeding effective public engagement strategies.

### **6.2.1 The purpose of sustainable development and the SDGs**

The majority of key informants were aware of the SDGs and their purpose in helping ensure the survival and well-being of future generations. This was due to the Voluntary National Review (VNR) progress report on implementation of the SDGs, which was a process coordinated by the National Planning Division under the Office of the Prime Minister, carried out in 2019. The SDG Taskforce comprising relevant ministries and non-government organisations was established in March 2019 to take stock and update the country's progress on achieving its national targets contributing to the SDGs. Between March and May 2019, the SDG Taskforce conducted extensive national consultations with line ministries and civil society groups to inform Tonga's VNR report. This process was supported by UNESCAP and the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) through the provision of technical and financial resources and coordinated largely by the National Planning Division. This demonstrates Tonga's commitment and ownership for achieving national targets to meet the global SDGs development priorities. However, some of the key informants who were part of the SDGs Taskforce felt that not all of the SDGs were relevant to Tonga. This illustrates the importance of understanding that the SDGs are only a global framework or

reference point to guide national efforts. Developing countries should be selective and adapt the SDGs to suit their national capacities and characteristics and be realistic about what they can really achieve nationally to inform their global contributions.

This point was put forward by Sebestyen et al., (2019) and Scherer et al., (2018). These authors found that understanding the interrelations of SDGs is crucial for nations to be able to adapt them to their national contexts. In particular, the authors suggest that national plans and policies required for SDG implementation should take into account the financial, cultural and economic capacities of the nation. Such considerations will help to elucidate the current status and capacity of the country in order to develop practical strategies to achieve the national targets. From the key informant interviews, it was apparent that the interrelations of SDGs are not well understood among the taskforce members, let alone the other government ministries, public enterprises, communities, and the business sector. In part, this could be attributed to the lack of awareness of the plethora of research on the SDGs which are not publicly available or disclosed to government institutions.

Moreover, the government's reliance on UNDP, UNESCAP, etc., for assistance to adapt and report SDG progress implies that the only information on SDGs that the government receives is limited to the information they receive from these donor organisations. There is a need, therefore, for research institutions to establish partnerships with development partners or the government themselves in order to inform the processes of understanding the interrelationships of SDGs (Hiruy & Eversole, 2019). This may also potentially be the missing link that connects theory to practice and allow knowledge exchange between academic and government institutions that may help solve many development problems around the world. The benefits from such partnerships are mutual. On the one hand, the academic or research institutions will be able to gain valuable insight and better understanding of the practical challenges and cultural conditions affecting sustainable development. On the other hand, the government will be able to gain access to a wealth of knowledge that can inform their decision making and save costs from engaging international consultants to access the studies and inform their decisions. Therefore, this study suggests that mechanisms that allow knowledge exchange between the research institutions and national government could be explored to alleviate some of the challenges to decision making emanating from lack of knowledge and information.

### 6.2.2 Increasing the awareness of the SDGs and SEA

While other developing countries such as Rwanda, Zambia and other countries in Africa, have taken the initiative to translate the SDGs into their local languages, Pacific Island countries, including Tonga have yet to follow suit. One of the suggestions from the key informants was the need to translate the SDGs into the local language. This is important and provides the impetus for government to take its ownership and commitment to the SDGs to the next level. Translating the SDGs into the Tongan language will add value and remove communication barriers which can enhance the inclusiveness of marginal groups such as the elderly members of society (Tonga VNR, 2019). However, despite this suggestion from two of the key informants, translating the SDGs into the Tongan language was not mentioned in the Tongan Voluntary National Review report, which suggests that there are no current plans to translate the SDGs into the Tongan language. This could be due to lack of human resources within government to conduct the translation. A potential way forward could be to engage the services of local NGO, for example the Tonga National Youth Congress to translate the SDGs into Tongan language. They could also conduct awareness campaigns that are simple and easy to understand by schools and other youth groups, to empower them and encourage them to contribute to the global SDGs. Moreover, the potential role of the Ministry of Education for translating SDGs in the Tongan language could also be explored. Simple translations of SDGs can then be integrated into school programmes and activities to increase the awareness of the SDGs.

From the interviews, the intergenerational conflicts around “new knowledge vs traditional knowledge” was raised. Many of the respondents from the study mentioned that people in Tonga are resistant to change and are very conservative people. This can be attributed to historical accounts of Tonga having never been colonized, meaning, the Tongan people have always been confident and comfortable in their way of life and no foreign power has ever had any major influence on changing their cultural and traditional practices (Niumeitolu, 2007). As a result, Tonga maintains strong national customary practices including the social hierarchy that determines the cultural dialogue protocols. Specifically, those higher in the Tongan hierarchy (royals, nobles, elite members) have a stronger voice compared to the commoners. The older members of society are seen as experienced and wise and are generally more respected in their society. Their opinions are highly valued in decision making processes, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. Accordingly, introducing new policies, plans or

processes has often been met with strong resistance by the local communities as it takes time for people, particularly the older generation, to fully grasp what the new process is all about. The latter are often hesitant to deviate from their traditional practices, social norms and strive to maintain the status quo. This is, however, changing since the reform of the constitution which has to some degree introduced the concepts of democracy and elements of freedom of choice and expression.

Young people have been influenced with modern interventions introduced by the international community, particularly in the agricultural sector as a result of increased international assistance. However, they struggle to communicate their new knowledge in a way that does not offend their parents and grandparents. The norm in Tonga is that parents and grandparents make the decisions and the youth and children are expected to listen and obey. Talking back or speaking their mind is considered disrespectful (Ross, 2009). It could thus be inferred that the older generation can potentially use this social norm to maintain power and avoid confrontation with their children or youth when new ideas are introduced. This resonates with the findings of Franken et al., (2016) who found that most Tongan returning scholars that studied overseas found it difficult to apply or use the knowledge gained from their studies to influence change in development in Tonga. This was attributed to conflicts they faced when their new knowledge and ideas for improving development were often disregarded by senior or elite members of society. As a result, the returning scholars found it difficult to effectively use their new knowledge in their workforce. In extreme cases, these cultural challenges have led to emigration of skilled and educated workers, resulting in high staff turnover, a common problem in progressing work for sustainable development. As such, intergenerational conflict is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for Tonga's development. Accordingly, developing effective and socially acceptable mechanisms for communication within this social hierarchical framework, could help address underlying communication barriers that are hampering Tonga's development.

### **6.2.3 Understanding the role of SEA**

Many of the respondents of the study indicated that there are elements of SEA already in practice in Tonga. However, in essence, they mistook the notion of SEA as a process that identifies the environmental, cultural, social and health aspects of their policies, plans and programmes, rather than the impacts of their PPP on these parameters. This is to be expected



given that it takes time to understand the notion of SEA and its difference from other strategic planning approaches and standard policy appraisal tools. Many respondents associated SEA with current planning tools used for achieving and tracking SDGs, such as the One Process tool and the Risk Resilience Tool Kit. The purpose of the One Process tool is to help improve holistic service delivery performance of government and allow better allocation of resources to achieve specific targets. The Risk Resilience Tool Kit helps corporate planners to integrate environmental and social considerations into project activities and also to identify and assess risks associated with project activities in order to manage such risks. The definition of risk in the Tonga VNR report, is the likelihood of a hazard or change occurring, and the probability of damaging consequences for vulnerable and exposed organizational assets, stakeholders, resources and activities. The Risk Resilience Took Kit is therefore concerned with project activities, the risks and measures to control such risks whereas the SEA process, seeks to address the wider impacts of plans, policies and programmes, cumulative impacts of projects, and unforeseen consequences of decision making. This suggests that for Tonga to take on SEA, planners and decision makers may need more understanding of the differences between strategic actions (national and sectoral planning) and project planning in order to help them understand where SEA can be applied to complement existing planning tools. This aligns with the findings of Alshukwait, (2005) who found that the concept of SEA may be difficult to understand because of the abstract and ‘short-sighted’ nature of policy planning. This makes it difficult to consider the practical impacts that may arise over the 5 to 10 year life time of the plan, policy or programme compared to project level EIA where people are more able to determine the impacts of physical projects that will be built within a shorter timeframe.

Moreover, the Tonga VNR report 2019 highlights crucial issues that need to be addressed in order to improve implementation and the delivery of the SDG targets. These include the need to advance reforms to strengthen national planning and decision making processes, holistic government approaches, increased participatory approaches, improved development cooperation and the need for accountable leadership and governance. These recommendations indicate two things. Firstly, many of the issues raised are issues that the SEA process seeks to address. This implies that SEA may currently be practiced in Tonga but needs strengthening and improvement to be at a standard that would help achieve the SDGs. Secondly, inclusiveness for achieving the SDGs needs strengthening which requires effective communication strategies and approaches, advocated in SEA. The SDG Taskforce comprises members only from government and the civil society groups but is lacking representatives from

the business sector and marginalized groups such as those in remote communities, people with disabilities, the elderly, adolescence and children and people with diverse sexual orientation. This implies that centralised decision-making and planning approaches are still prevalent in Tonga. Participatory approaches, being a major part of SEA, can therefore support the presents inclusion of marginalised groups to participate in policy and planning for SDGs.

The centralised planning approach in Tonga resonates with other studies that identify ineffective and poor participatory approaches in the SEA process (Alshuwaikhat, 2005; Changbo, Chuangrong, Xingeng, Shixi, & Yanjun, 2005; White & Noble, 2013b; Wirutskulshai et al., 2011). These authors discuss the challenges around effective public participation strategies in SEA attributed to centralised government systems that often exclude communities in their public participation processes. The authors ascribe these shortcomings to the lack of national ownership and realization by the national government regarding the importance of involving communities and businesses in their policy planning processes. This lack of ownership points to the dependence on international assistance, highlighted as one of the limiting factors for effective SEA practice, due to lack of knowledge transfer to build local capacity to administer the SEA process. To address this, Slunge and Tran (2014) assert that the drive for employing SEA for embedding sustainable development in policy planning should come from within government itself. Accordingly, SEA will only be effective in achieving its purpose for supporting sustainability when the government fully recognizes its role in guiding policy planning processes. Tonga's high dependence on international aid to support policy and planning development processes as well as supporting reporting requirements to multilateral environmental agreements, implies that it would also likely be relying on donor agencies to provide the impetus for using SEA. It is therefore, essential that the SEA process is introduced to Tonga in a manner that emphasizes the importance of its ownership of the tool and tailoring SEA to suit its decision making characteristic needs as best as possible, taking into account its current capacity to utilise SEA in its policy planning processes.

### **6.3 Factors for Institutionalizing SEA in Tonga**

#### **6.3.1 SEA Guidelines**

The results indicate that capacity building needs for introducing SEA are high in Tonga. Given that 90 percent of the respondents had never heard of SEA, the technical understanding

of the concepts of SEA in relation to advancing the sustainability agenda for decision makers, SEA practitioners and the administrative body in government is crucial. This is consistent with the suggestions by Polido et al., (2014; 2016; 2018) and Alshukwait (2005) to establish tools and guidelines to support the collaboration of all stakeholders throughout each stage of SEA process. The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) is in the process of drafting the SEA Guidelines for the Pacific Island Countries. The role of SPREP for supporting environmental planning in the Pacific region thus provides an opportunity and avenue for Tonga and other PICs to participate in the formulation of their guidelines. However, given that the SEA is not well known in PICs, it can be expected that countries may struggle to understand the purpose of SEA and their need for the process. Moreover, the challenges that PICs face in enforcing EIA (Barr, 2007; EIA Guidelines 2016; Onorio, 2000) may increase the resistance within PICs and Tonga to adopt SEA. As a consequence, PICs contribution to the formulation process may be limited, and will put the onus on SPREP to develop and introduce the SEA process in a form that will not complicate national environmental assessment processes. Essentially, the importance of country context will need to be emphasized to help PICs understand that the SEA process should be adapted to meet their policy planning needs rather than adapting their PPP processes to accommodate the process.

Moreover, the evolving nature of SEA since its conception in the 1980s implies that there is potential for SEA to be introduced to PICs in its very earliest form, modelled on the EIA process. In this early phase, SEA was administered much like the EIA process, focussing on impacts of the PPPs, and technical information was overly emphasized as crucial for informing decisions. However, over the years, it was realized that this form of SEA did not take into account important factors that also influence decision making. Factors such as culture, political environments, social hierarchy, etc., were not taken into account and thus affected the effectiveness of SEA. Lessons learnt from the ongoing problems encountered by PICs in enforcing EIA (Barr, 2007) suggests that taking on SEA in its initial form (EIA-driven) may not be effective in the long term. This is because conducting SEA as a separate process will require an SEA consultant to assess the sustainability considerations of the PPP. Tonga has a lack of local EIA consultants and it can therefore be expected that SEA consultants will also need to be sourced externally. This will be costly and most likely deter government from taking up the SEA process. However, the typical practice is that most PPPs are formulated with the help of donor agencies and international consultants, implying that even if government decides that SEA will be useful for them, the institutionalization of SEA process will most likely rely

on international development assistance. Consequently, the government is less likely to take ownership of SEA to advance their efforts for achieving the SDGs and therefore, undermine the potential transformative role of SEA in changing the paradigm for decision making towards a more sustainable pathway (Runhaar and Driessen, 2007; Therivel, 2010).

### 6.3.2 Legislative Support

In addition to SEA Guidelines, the need for formal legislative support is highlighted by SEA scholars as important to support the institutionalization of SEA in developing countries (Wood 2003; Wilson and Wars, 2011). The institutional analysis of this study however, indicates that if SEA is made mandatory through formal legislation, there is no guarantee that SEA will be effective and that resources will be allocated for its use. Many of the reports and plans assessed indicated that the lack of compliance and poor enforcement of legislation was an ongoing problem for environmental management (TSDF II, MDG report 2015). This is largely attributed to the priorities of the government of the day, cultural norms and the lack of capacity and human resources to effectively enforce the legislation related to ecosystem management. To illustrate, Thompson (2014) studied the effective practice of EIA in Tonga and found that challenges emanating from lack of awareness, lack of sufficient budget to operationalize EIA activities, lack of transparency and accountability and lack of human resources and capacity were limiting factors for effective EIA implementation. These are generic problems faced not only in Tonga but in other developing nations as well (Badr, 2009; Barr, 2007; Onorio, 1999).

This points to a key message in EIA and SEA literature about the importance of understanding context when applying generic environmental management tools to be “fit for purpose” (Bina, 2008; Fundingsland Tetlow and Hanusch, 2013; Morrison-Saunders, Pope, Gunn, et al., 2014). Important factors often overlooked when introducing impact assessment tools are cultural factors or behavioural norms that affect EIA implementation. This can be attributed to the assumption that when EIA processes are tailored to suit the country context, the norm is to look at the formal institutional capacities of implementation (legislation, policies) rather than the informal institutions (behaviour, cultural norms) of the people who are developing the policies as well as implementing them (Morgan, 2017). These western processes are introduced to developing nations by developed countries which have the technical and financial resources to implement such processes according to the way they

designed them. When these tools are introduced to developing countries to address their environmental problems, many variables such as cultural norms, social and customary practices are often not thoroughly understood. As a result, the tools are not as effective and do not achieve their intended purpose.

Understanding the country context of Tonga is essential to understand developmental problems. Taufe'ulungaki (2003) stated that western culture is based on individual rights and freedom, independence, justice in terms of equality and access, privacy, competition, consumerism and science whereas the Tongan culture is based on cooperation and consensus, respect, generosity, loyalty, sharing, humility, reconciliation, fulfilment of mutual obligations and reciprocity. She further asserted that the underlying purpose of western culture is to create personal wealth and individual well-being which is based on economic capital, while the underlying purpose of the Tongan culture is to maintain good relationships and strong communities and is based on social capital. These cultural differences provide an understanding about the cultural value placed on maintaining good relationships in the Tongan context which is often overlooked when introducing environmental management tools.

Thompson (2014) identifies that this cultural factor has affected EIA implementation in Tonga. For instance, despite many non-compliance cases found since the enforcement of the EIA began in Tonga in 2010, no prosecution cases have made it to the Attorney General Office. This is due to political and cultural factors where the decision makers or those in power avoid litigation as much as possible. Often, they use their authority to dissuade technical and junior staff from pursuing legal action and suggest other means such as multiple meetings to settle the confrontation (Thompson, 2014). Thompson cautions that this practice provides potential for corruption and impunity. This cultural practice and pressure to maintain good social relationships thus puts a strain on technical officers and puts them in a difficult position for implementing EIA laws and resonates Boyle's (1998) findings about similar cultural factors that also affect EIA implementation in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Learning from this experience in EIA in Tonga therefore suggests that formal legislative support to carry out and oversee the SEA process may not be a crucial factor for its uptake in Tonga.

### 6.3.3 Political Commitment

The lack of political commitment is one of the main contributing factors to the problems faced when introducing a new PPP. The present political conditions of Tonga are tied to the

history of power struggles since Tonga became a monarchy in 1845 under King George Tupou the First and later progressed to become a constitutional monarchy in 1875 (Herda, Terrell, & Gunson, 1987). The 1875 Constitution was constructed to give authority and power for royals and nobles to rule and govern the nation which restricted power of other chiefs and those lower in the social hierarchy. Inevitably, corruption and abuse of power emerged which created unrest among people of the lower social status. Consequently, the need for democracy was raised by the majority of the Tongan people and, led by the late Prime Minister, Akilisi Pohiva, they sought to introduce democracy through reform of the constitution with the assumption that changing the constitution would change the power dynamics to alleviate corruptive practices in government. After countless and failed attempts for change, the 2006 riots brought to light the internal plights of Tonga which to some extent created the momentum and realization by the royals and nobles for the need to embrace change (Campbell, 2018). As a result, in 2010, the Tongan Constitution was amended and provisions for a more democratic form of government were imposed.

However, Campbell(2005) argues that democracy was not the main factor for this radical change in Tonga's governance regime. Rather, the strong cultural norms and traditions and the realization for the need to change the 'order of business' was more influential in the quest for democracy. Many researchers also concur with the fact that strong cultural traditions play a huge role in the progress and development of Tonga (Campbell, 2018; Kalavite, 2010; Ross, 2000; Thompson, 2014) and such traditions have also inhibited and obscured the ability of Tonga to transition to a fully democratic country (Powles, 2007). This demonstrates two issues that must be recognized for SEA uptake. Firstly, in order for SEA to be recognized as useful or effective in Tonga, it must be driven from within Tonga and aligned with Tongan cultural norms, traditions and social hierarchy. This implies that SEA must be promoted and administered by a traditionally powerful Ministry such as the Office of Prime Minister or Ministry of Finance and National Planning. Studies by Nilsson & Persson, (2017) and Axelsson et al., (2012), support this view. Secondly, informal institutions i.e culture and traditions, religion and behaviour of the Tongan people, will always prevail and be more influential for SEA uptake over the formal institutions i.e legislation, financial and technical capacity in Tonga. Accordingly, this study suggests that political commitment will be one of the most influential factors for introducing SEA in Tonga.

### 6.3.4 Financial Assistance

Despite having never been colonized, the increasing investments and financial assistance provided by many international development agencies are increasing in Tonga. For example, the growing influence on development from the Republic of China suggests that Tonga may be at risk of neo-colonialism. The concerns for corruption raised in the TSDF II that may potentially hamper development efforts in Tonga can be linked to past practice in how development assistance was administered in Tonga (Dornan and Brant, 2014). Development assistance from China was done politically with little consultation of relevant authorities in government and the lack of oversight of the loans and grants and how they were used has resulted in a great deal of criticism by the Tongan people. According to Dornan and Brant (2014), the normal processes of due diligence administered by the Ministry of Finance for receiving international development assistance were evaded in the case of Chinese development aid. The increasing aid and debt owed to China by Tonga therefore suggests that Tonga may not be in a position to decline China's request for further marine resources out of respect and feeling obligated to return the favour and maintain good relationships with the Republic of China.

Many national processes and safeguards are therefore at risk of being evaded and hence, in this sense, China is to some extent driving changes in Tonga under the guise of bilateral aid. It is therefore essential that Tonga learns from this past experience and develops mechanisms to prevent these maladministration practices. There is positive progress in this with the recent introduction of 'no loans policy' and the suggestion for developing a national development aid policy to enhance coordination of development partner programs in Tonga (Dornan and Brant, 2014; Tonga VNR, 2019). Tonga also recently acceded to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, which suggests that improvements in governance are imminent and points to the importance of good governance and transparency. It also reflects the need for policies to hold present leaders accountable for the decisions they make and more importantly understand the impacts of their decisions influenced by development aid. SEA can thus potentially contribute to alleviating some of these problems as demonstrated by Polido et al., (2014) and Runhaar (2016) in that it provides an avenue to increase the awareness of sustainability in decision makers and allows public scrutiny of policy and planning processes.

### 6.3.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

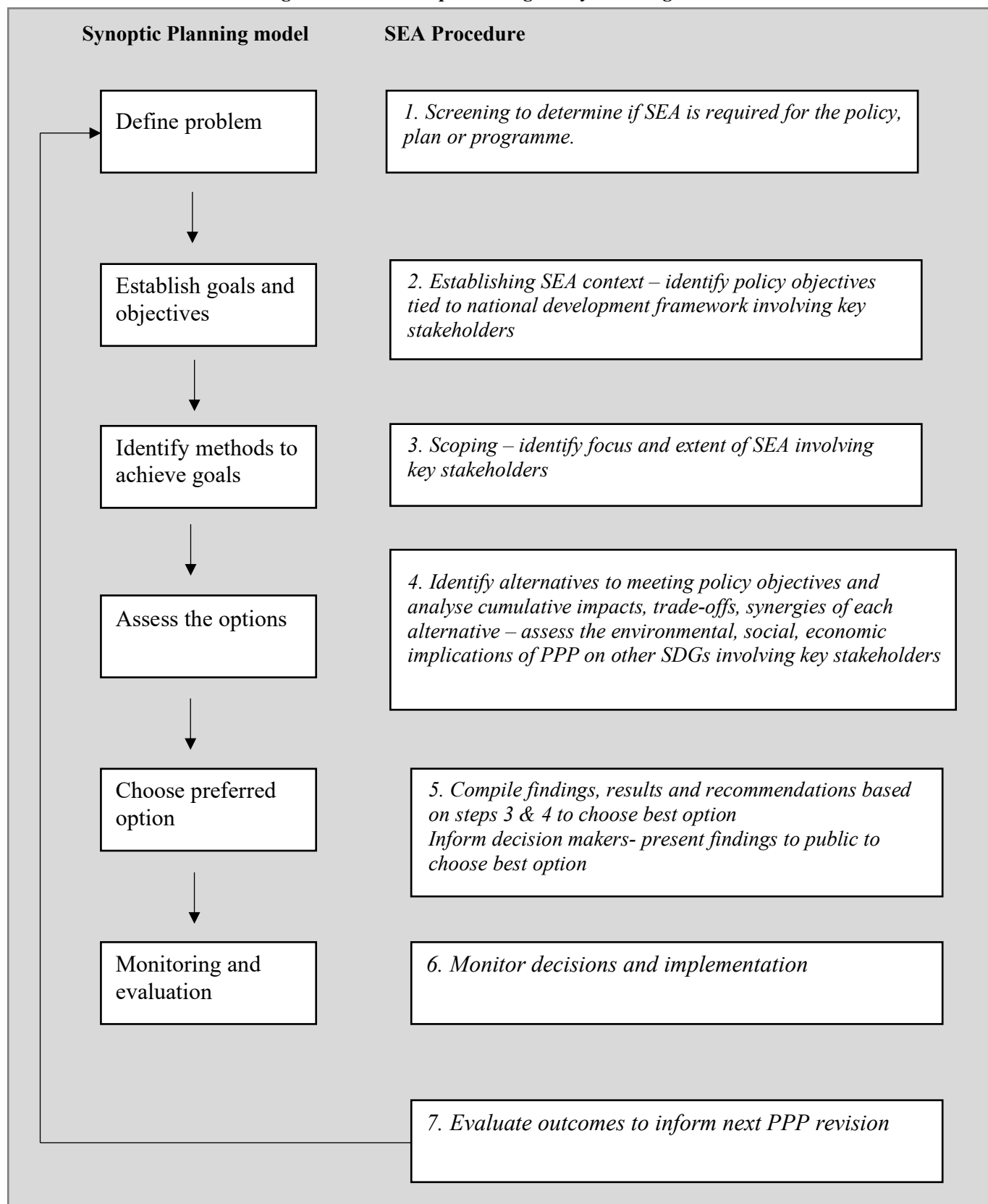
Capacity building for monitoring and evaluation was identified as a key component that needed strengthening in the TSDF II. Most respondents also indicated that monitoring and evaluation is an important part of their work in monitoring the progress of achieving the various national targets for SDGs. The monitoring and evaluation mechanisms employed by the government comprise methods that support coordinated sectoral meetings as well as individual corporate/sector/ministerial reporting methods prescribed by the Public Service Commission. The SEA process requires that recommendations and findings of the SEA report should be monitored and evaluated in order to ensure that SEA has achieved its purpose for promoting sustainable development and embedding the sustainability principles in policy planning process (Fischer, 2015; Hanna et al., 2014; Morrison-Saunders, Pope, Bond, & Retief, 2014). Committee meeting updates are deemed more efficient and more effective than collation of written reports. The Tonga VNR report states that there is a need to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure their effectiveness in assessing the impacts of SDGs and more importantly for using the information in the monitoring report more widely. The highly politicised commitment for achieving SDGs presents an opportunity for SEA to immerse itself in the SDG process. To illustrate, many of the areas needing improvement and support for strengthening are issues that the SEA process was designed to do for PPPs from its inception to implementation and review stage. For example, the role of Crown Law in Tonga for screening and assessing legislation to prevent overlaps or conflicting policies and legislation can be supplemented by the national planning division and other authorities to identify the environmental, economic and social impacts to expedite the evaluation of policies, plans and programmes.

## 6.4 Recommendations

From the literature review, document analysis and institutional analysis, the recommendations around the major factors to consider for SEA uptake in Tonga are described below. Figure 10 illustrates how the SEA process can complement and improve current policy planning processes if conducted simultaneously to ensure that sustainability principles and approaches are employed throughout the policy planning development process. This follows the incremental model of applying SEA. The researcher believes this approach may be more time efficient and require less resources to institutionalize in Tonga.



**Figure 10: SEA Complementing Policy Planning Processes**



Source: Adapted from (Lane, 2005; Partidario 2000; Dalal Clayton and Sadler, 2005)

### 6.4.1 Recommendation 1: Political Will

This study has found that political will is a major factor for Tonga to appreciate the value that SEA can add to its current policy and planning approaches. The changing political climate in Tonga suggests that the development priorities of the country may influence the order of business. However, the government is still mandated to implement and fulfil the objectives of the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II, a ten year plan which has a revision date of 2025. Sustainability is well embedded in the TSDF II and integrated well into other overarching strategic action plans and sectoral plans guiding the implementation of the sustainable development goals.

The techniques, pathways and methods for achieving SDGs are evolving to suit the constant changes to the political, economic, social and biophysical environment. The best fit and ‘how to’ approach for SEA is also constantly evolving in academia as well as in practice. While SEA theory is well ahead of practice, this study suggests that SEA must continuously be ‘proactive’ in its role as a catalyst for advancing the sustainability agenda. More research is therefore suggested on testing the application of the more recent ‘models’ of SEA in different contexts. As a start, rather than re-inventing the wheel, SEA can build upon what is already being done to add value to the policy and planning development processes and decision-making processes. Indeed in the case of Tonga, this research shows positive progress in terms of planning and policy making and decision making processes centred around inclusivity and sustainable development. However, the main challenges also present the biggest breakthrough for achieving the SDGs.

Tonga’s commitment to achieving the SDGs presents SEA the opportunity it needs to rise to the Agenda 2030 challenge. Accordingly, it is essential that the wealth of knowledge from the research and academic institutions is made accessible and placed in the right hands to make the most of it. The current system of knowledge exchange is one of the reasons for the mismatch between SEA theory and practice. This research recommends that part of the problem of poor decision making linked to poor access to information, can be alleviated by establishing partnerships with institutions who hold the knowledge and direct new researchers to fill the gaps or build on what others have found. In addition, publishing and dissemination of research material should also be made available to governments in Tonga as well as other PICs who do not always have the technical resources and information on which to base their decisions. There are also a few research studies unpublished, for example, Barr (2007) which

may be useful for Pacific Island countries. From this perspective, a data base of research conducted in the Pacific on impact assessment is warranted. It is therefore the role of government as well to utilise the results of the many research students who have used Tonga as their case study and establish meaningful partnerships with academic institutions in this regard through finding common ground and mutual benefits.

#### **6.4.2 Recommendation 2: International and Regional Cooperation**

There is a plethora of SEA literature emphasizing the importance of local ownership and drive for SEA. This study also agrees with this as a factor for SEA institutionalization in Tonga. The study found that Tonga is highly reliant on international and regional cooperation to assist in their policy, planning development processes as well as in the implementation of the projects to meet the policy plan objectives. To some extent this means that for Tonga, it may take a long while for it to be able to operate and sustain its use of SEA. The current works into the development of SEA Guidelines by SPREP could prove as a catalyst and incentive for Tonga and other PICs to uptake SEA in their PPP formulation or review processes. However, the SEA model and approach would still need to be tailored to suit the individual country contexts.

Given the poor economic stability of Tonga, progress towards sustainable development could be set back due to events outside of its control, for example natural disasters. As such, Tonga may need quick solutions to introduce plans and policies to address such set-backs but also consider the impacts of such policies and plans. The slow nature of SEA may be a deterrent for them. This study therefore suggests a ‘rapid’ form of SEA to be developed and tested on countries who may not have the ‘luxury’ of time to make informed decisions regarding their development. On the international front, the World Bank, ADB and other international funding agencies have a major role in influencing the way countries address their environmental challenges. Promoting SEA has been a focus of the ADB, OECD as well as the World Bank, however, with the changing political regimes, these international agencies have learnt to take a ‘step back’ as governments becomes more assertive in presenting their real needs and how they want to approach their development challenges. This means forfeiting some of their requirements for SEA processes and consultants if countries do not see the need to carry out the assessments. This also indicates that these agencies are amending their requirements for SEA on case by case basis. While environmental and social safeguards are a vital component

for project viability assessment, assessing implications and wider impacts of policies, plans and programmes and cumulative impacts are still not commonly practiced. This so-called ‘short term’ planning may result in wasting time and resources that could have better been used to meet the common SDG. The inter-relations of SDGs therefore require SEA to recognize the synergies and trade-offs to make better use of time, resources and facilitate efficiency to meet the SDGs. This implies that the regional and international community will also play a huge role in influencing when, how and why Tonga may choose to institutionalize SEA.

### 6.4.3 Recommendation 3: Participatory Approaches

The research found that Tonga needs more time to understand new processes. Accordingly, the SEA process must take this into account and establish mechanisms to ensure that temporal factors meet the needs of the local people. It is important, however, to distinguish between the ‘rapid’ form of SEA recommended above. Government needs to realize their role as mediators and be neutral and impartial in their decision making to ensure that the biophysical, social needs and economic needs are balanced. The research suggests, however that this may be difficult, given that government members are also part of the community, business and will thus have these conflicting interests and pressures as well as inclination to obligations required by culture and tradition. Meeting the social expectations and norms can sometimes prevail over the written law which are also factors that influence development. Political leaders, therefore, need to be held accountable and responsible for their decisions, yet not many mechanisms support this. SEA promotes good governance through transparency however, the transparency may be not be fully supported and conducive to current cultural and traditional norms where the way information is extracted and exchanged is not effective.

Access to information and knowledge by the government is poor. The current system is structured in a way that exacerbates the lack of access and generates further reliance on international aid. Governments are required to pay expensive consultants to assist in developing strategic and action plans, which are normally paid by international consultants. These reports or information are considered vital to assist government to make more informed decisions. This study suggests that engaging international consultants without prior and informed knowledge of cultural sensitivities, social and economic environments of the country can potentially cause more harm than good, despite their best intentions to meet environmental objectives. These consultants normally work under a timeline which contributes to the ‘rush’ in the consultation

process. Accordingly, the question of who really benefits from international cooperation is questionable, if timeframes for consultation activities do not take into account the communication barriers.

Throughout this study the importance of stakeholder engagement is highlighted in many of the case studies of using SEA. Ironically, participative approaches and effective stakeholder engagement is yet to be reported as an effective component of the SEA process. This study recommends that communication barriers must first be looked into and addressed if any progress for development is to be made. This must begin within government and their local communities and small businesses before it can be extended to development partners. A lot of evidence from the study points to the communication barriers in getting information. The next problem then lies in how this information is interpreted and utilized. Consultants get paid to access and apply this information and produce SEA reports which are not entirely used because governments lack the resources to monitor and follow through the conditions and recommendations of the report. The chain of knowledge and information source, exchange and utilisation, thus needs to be studied more to extract the root of the problem. The study raises many questions; Who has information and how to access it? How can the information be made more accessible to help the right people? How can government share information with each other? From the interviews, the budget and resource allocations to ministries by government appears distorted. There are concerns that strategic plans are essential for articulating information to leverage funding but once funding is secured, they are directed to other priorities other than what they were intended for. Ultimately, this causes distrust in the people and frustration builds when people provide information so freely, yet they see no improvements in their situation. As such, this study recommends more research on effective communication and knowledge exchange and utilisation to facilitate transparent and accountability in Tonga.

#### **6.4.4 Recommendation 4: Capacity Building**

In theory, capacity building is another building block for sustainable development. However, building capacity of local people to operate SEA may not be sustainable if the interest and drive for SEA is not there to begin with. From the researcher's experience, government is inundated with so many tools and interventions to support their operations, however these tools can become obstructive to meeting sustainability objectives due to them usually being designed by developed countries of different contexts to that of Tonga. For example, Tonga has

progressed in its use of the EIA tool for its intended purpose of managing development. However, there are still struggles in implementing EIA, associated with lack of capacity and technical expertise. SEA may be seen by the Tongan government as yet another tool or intervention to add to the growing number of mechanisms for achieving sustainability. The concepts and components of SEA should thus be framed in a way that avoids ambiguity which will further confuse its users. A good way to begin is to focus on the proven benefits and strengths of the SEA process but also caution and realize its limitations.

SEA is not perfect in itself, but is constantly evolving to fit into the changing policy, planning processes. At the end of the day, Tonga should decide on whether the tool will be useful and determine the capacity building needs that it may require. This study found many challenges that Tonga is facing for SDGs and has identified the areas where the SEA process can potentially help to alleviate some of the those challenges. The challenges encountered in Tonga may be similar to what other PICs are facing. As such, the findings of this research may be helpful in enhancing the understanding of SEA and how it might be useful for other PICs. The researcher suggests potential expansion of this research to study the implementation of the policies, plans and programmes emanating from the SDGs 2030 Agenda in Tonga and other Pacific Island countries. Also, the perspectives from the small businesses and communities in regard to SDGs could be explored further to draw out greater insights on the underlying barriers for implementation emanating from social, cultural and traditional processes and expectations.

## 7 Conclusion

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Sustainable development has come a long way since its inception in the 1970s. Being the main focus of the Agenda 2030, the SDGs elicit the need for united global change following the mantra of ‘leaving no one behind’. Inevitably, the SDGs encompass a range of benefits as well as challenges. Joining the global move for sustainable development, Tonga recognizes the need to develop within ecological limits. However, many challenges to sustainable development have persisted over the years, exacerbated by growing demand for economic growth and increasing populations. Sustainable development tools such as environmental impact assessment, EIA are applied too late in the development process with missed opportunities for remedial action. SEA was conceived to address this problem but also takes a step back to assess the cumulative effects, interconnections between development plans and proposals and is therefore able to guide planning towards safer and more sustainable pathways. This study contributes to the discussion on SEA’s role in advancing the sustainability agenda in Tonga, a Pacific Island country but took a pro-active approach in that SEA has had very limited application in Tonga and other PICs. Drawing on the concepts of sustainable development, SEA theory and institutional theory, and learning from SEA practice in developing countries as well as studies conducted in Fiji and Tonga, the study endeavoured to answer the research question: *“is there a role for SEA to improve current planning and policy making processes towards achieving SDGs in Tonga?”* The simple answer is yes, it can indeed help to improve current regimes to help achieve the SDGs. A review of the objectives and the findings of the study is presented below to explain how SEA can help.

## 7.1 Review of Research Objectives

### 7.1.1 To evaluate the potential of SEA to facilitate good governance and transformational change to alleviate current problems in PPP processes

The ‘creators’ of SEA promote it as a tool that can deliver good governance and transformational change in planning and the way decisions are made for improved outcomes for sustainable development. However, this research suggests that SEA may be implausible when it comes to its practical use. Many users of SEA in developing countries identified challenges relating to the need for capacity building, guidelines and legislation, financial implications which all point to problems associated with SEA practice and its impact on planning processes and implementation. Learning from these developing countries experiences namely, small island developing states Orkney and Azores studied by Polido et al., (2014), may set Tonga up for what to expect and then proactively avoid repeating those mistakes by having support systems in place to address them. A key component that is still lagging behind theory is the participatory role of SEA. This is a crucial part of SEA that requires context specific approaches for its application. Tonga will need to tailor specific approaches to find a way around existing cultural and traditional norms of communication and social expectations in order to find common ground for sustainable development interests to advance progress for achieving the SDGs.

The study found that SEA certainly has potential in alleviating problems in current PPP processes as well as supporting good governance. However, many barriers in the real world, related to limited capacities; lack of understanding of SEA concepts and guidance; lack of local ownership and drive; and lack of monitoring and following through recommendations from the SEA process, has impeded SEA from achieving its full potential. With so many of these barriers to consider, SEA tool has lost its ‘glamour’ in policy and planning processes. Tonga can deem the process to be difficult because the standards and requirements are too complex to attain. To get the conditions and requirements in place, would need political commitment to achieving sustainable development which is embodied in the SDGs. Therefore, commitment to SDGs may provide the impetus to reprise the role of SEA for advancing the sustainability agenda.



**7.1.2 To determine the level of sustainability considerations in Tonga's planning, policy and programme development processes in order to identify current problems in relation to achieving SDG targets.**

This study identified strengths as well as weaknesses in relation to sustainability considerations in Tonga's policy and planning processes. The SDGs are well known by most government ministries and have been integrated across sectoral plan and corporate plans but have yet to be fully integrated into community development plans. The processes for developing these policies and plans in Tonga are driven by government with the support of international agencies in providing financial assistance as well as consultants necessary to guide the policy planning processes. The PPPs are therefore, theoretically well-endowed with sustainability considerations and the importance of stakeholder engagement, political commitment, capacity building are explicitly advocated for in the policies, plans and programmes for SDGs. Accordingly, some of the strengths of the current PPPs development processes include technical working groups, steering committees that support monitoring mechanisms that have the potential to provide coherence in policy planning processes. However, Tonga is lacking a holistic and systematic mechanism to identify synergies and trade-offs and more importantly, follow up or keep track of progress to identify areas that need further support and resources to ensure delivery and achievement of SDGs targets.

Poor participatory processes exacerbated by tokenism when governments rush the public consultation processes and fail to understand the real needs of the people are also existing problems in relation to understanding of the SDGs in Tonga. This may be ascribed to fixed timelines in which government, planners and donor agencies operate. Seeking out marginalised groups and encouraging their participation in policy and planning is recognized as important in the Voluntary National Review report on Tonga's progress for achieving the SDGs. However, the inclusion of small businesses seems is unclear and not acknowledged in the report. This could be attributed to lack of communication and a sense of distrust as mentioned by one of the key informants about the role of government in obtaining and dispersing donor aid and duplication of work that could be shared with NGOs and small business enterprises. The SEA process is such that can help to alleviate these problems in that it provides an avenue for checks and balances and gives a voice to marginalised groups, whose views are important yet often overlooked in policy and planning processes. However, in order for SEA to alleviate this problem, a way around the traditional and cultural norms as well as

social expectations must be devised to avoid communication barriers that may impede this vital part of the SEA process. The research therefore, suggests that the translation of the SDGs into the Tongan language may be a crucial part and good first step to progressing efforts for achieving the SDGs. However, caution must be taken to ensure that one translation is used to avoid further confusion if the SDGs are translated by different government departments and sectors to suit their needs for raising awareness and education about the SDGs.

### **7.1.3 To identify the factors that may influence the uptake of SEA in Tonga and evaluate the barriers that may affect its institutionalization.**

From the institutional analysis, key factors to consider for SEA uptake in Tonga are quite similar to what has been suggested in the SEA literature. A profound finding in this study is the role of culture affecting environmental management affairs. The common practice of dividing whole systems into parts, such as dividing government roles into sectors has greatly impacted and obstructed our ability to see the government as a system. In an ideal theoretical world, the government is meant to be the mediator that ensures fairness, equitability and promotes sustainability by finding the development options that would meet the best interests of the three pillars of sustainability, the social, economic and environmental pillars. If government becomes biased favouring economic interests without considering the impacts on the environment and social environments, they could be seen as corrupted. In practice, people in government are part of the social world and are also linked to the economic pillars of developments as well as the environment. This then causes potential for government to compromise their position and makes them prone to favouritism, nepotism. This can be seen as corruption in other cultures but could just be normal practice for meeting social expectations and complying with traditional protocols. Understanding the behaviour and culture of Tongan people, is therefore fundamental and could help provide radical solutions faced in the quest for meeting the SDGs.

#### **7.1.4 To recommend practical conditions and requirements for the uptake of SEA in Tonga.**

This study has found pertinent issues to consider in regard to institutionalizing the SEA process in Tonga. The steps and requirements for SEA uptake in Tonga are suggested as follows:

1. With the support of SPREP and SEA expert, communication with the Ministry responsible for National Planning, currently under the Office of the Prime Minister to establish the needs of the country as identified in the Voluntary National Review for achieving the SDGs.
2. Using the draft SEA Guidelines developed by SPREP, Tonga can develop its own set of practical SEA Guidelines to suit national decision making and policy planning processes.
3. Relevant legislation for National Planning or Environmental Management and Environmental Impact Assessment can be assessed to gauge where SEA process can fit into current legislative requirements.
4. An evaluation of policies and plans due for review in relation to SDGs can be used as a 'pilot' to test the SEA process in raising the sustainability awareness and agenda for planners and decision makers. OR a SEA study can be performed on a current sector plan to identify areas where the plan may fall short in meeting their objectives for achieving the SDGs.

## 7.2 Conclusion

This study has elucidated some of the practical challenges impeding sustainable development in Tonga from a policy planning perspective. Inevitably, these challenges affect the implementation phases for pragmatically achieving SDGs. In many respects, they are not new challenges and are very similar to developmental challenges faced in other small developing nations around the world. The approach and methods of this study can be applied to other Pacific Island countries to understand their unique characteristics which must be understood to define the ‘best fit’ for institutionalizing SEA not only in Tonga but in other Pacific Island Countries as well.

Accordingly, this study draws three conclusions about the potential role of SEA for achieving the SDGs in Tonga. The first is, SEA can indeed help Tonga to achieve SDGs by acting as a ‘catalyst’ to facilitate coordination, detect cumulative impacts and enhance inclusiveness for improving current policy, planning processes for achieving SDGs. Tonga’s commitment to achieving the SDGs has highlighted the need for more effective mechanisms to coordinate national activities for SDGs, which SEA can help to deliver. Second, the deeper informal institutional factors related to political will, culture and social human behaviours are more influential than formal institutional factors, legislation and guidelines for the effective uptake of SEA in Tonga, which may also pertain to other Pacific Island countries. Accordingly, in order for SEA to be institutionalised in Tonga and other Pacific Island countries, deeper research into understanding the culture and behaviour of their people is required in order to find innovative solutions to work around the cultural barriers identified in this study. Lastly, bilateral aid donors and international development organisations can support and enhance the institutionalization of SEA in Tonga, but only to a certain extent. However, the old practice of ‘adapting the country to fit the tool’ should be shifted to ‘adapting the tool to fit the country’. Tonga would need to realize the need for SEA and be willing to learn and integrate the SEA process into its planning and decision making processes, to expedite its efforts for achieving SDGs and beyond.

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## 9 Appendices

### Appendix A




Legislation Governing the application of EIA in Pacific Island Countries.

Pacific Island Countries	Legislation
Cook Islands	Environment Act 2003
Federated states of Micronesia	Environmental Protection Act 1980 (National) Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 1989 (national) Environmental Protection Act 1994 (Chuuk) Regulations for Environmental Impact Assessment (chuuk) Protection of Environment Act (Kosrae) Regulations for Development 1994 (Kosrae) Environmental Protection Act 1992 (Pohnpei) Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (Pohnpei) Environmental Quality Protection Act 1987 (Yap) Regulations for Environmental Impact Assessment 1995 (Yap)
Fiji	Environment Management Act 2005 Environment Management (EIA Process) Regulations 2007
Kiribati	Environment Act 1999, Environment (Amendment) Act 2007 DRAFT Environment (General) Regulation 2011
Nauru	No legislation enacted
Niue	Environment Act 2015
Palau	Environmental Quality Protection Act 1981 Environmental Impact Statement Regulations 1996
Papua new Guinea	Environment Act 2000 Environment (Permits) Regulation 2002 Environment (Prescribed Activities) Regulation 2002
Eepublic of the Marshall Islands	National Environmental Protection Act 1984 Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 1994
Samoa	Planning and Urban Management Act 2004 Planning and Urban Management (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2007
Solomon Islands	Environment Act 1998 Environment Regulations 2008
Tonga	Environmental Impact Assessment Act 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2010
Tuvalu	Environment Protection Act 2008 Environment Protection (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2014
Vanuatu	Environmental Protection and Conservation Act 2010 Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2011

Source: SPREP, 2016

## Appendix B

## List of SDGs, targets and indicators

Sustainable Development Goal	Targets	Indicators	
	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning	Number of countries that have communicated the establishment or operationalization of an integrated policy/strategy/plan which increases their ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change, and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development in a manner that does not threaten food production (including a national adaptation plan, nationally determined contribution, national communication, biennial update report or other)
	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	14.2 By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans	Proportion of national exclusive economic zones managed using ecosystem-based approaches
	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	15.9 By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts	Progress towards national targets established in accordance with Aichi Biodiversity Target 2 of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020

*Source: United Nations (2015)*

## Appendix C

Tonga national documents relevant to SDGs 13,14 and 15.

National documents and legislations	Responsible Ministry/ Agency
<b>National</b>	
<i>Constitution of Tonga</i>	All Ministries
<i>Tonga Strategic Development Framework II</i>	All Ministries
<i>National Infrastructure Investment Plan</i>	Ministry of Infrastructure
<i>Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Management</i>	Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster management, Environment, Communication and Climate Change (MEIDECC)
<i>Climate Change Policy 2016</i>	MEIDECC
<i>National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan</i>	MEIDECC
<b>Sectoral</b>	
<i>Tonga Fisheries Sector Plan</i>	Ministry of Fisheries (MoF)
<i>Tonga Agriculture Sector Plan</i>	Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (MAFF)
<i>Environmental Management Act 2016</i>	MEIDECC
<i>Environmental Impact Assessment Act &amp; Regulations 2016</i>	MEIDECC
<i>Fisheries Management Act 2016</i>	MoF
<i>Forest Act 2016</i>	MAFF
<i>Parks and Reserves Act 2016</i>	Ministry of Land, Survey and Natural Resources (MLSNR)
<i>Land Act 2016</i>	MLSNR
<i>National Spatial Planning and Management Act 2016</i>	MLSNR
<b>Ministry</b>	
<i>MEIDECC Corporate Plan</i>	MEIDECC
<i>MAFF Corporate Plan</i>	MAFF
<i>MOF Corporate Plan</i>	MoF
<b>Community</b>	
<i>Community Development Plan</i>	Ministry of Internal Affairs

## Key

 Documents selected for analysis in this research

Appendix D

Key Informant Interview Questions

**Part 1: Exploring the problems in planning**

1. What is your role in your organization?
2. How does your organization contribute to or what is your ministry/organisation's involvement in policy planning processes?
3. What does sustainable development mean to you? Who do you think should be responsible for integrating sustainability considerations into PPPs?
4. How important and practical are the SDGs for your organization and for Tonga? How are you incorporating the SDGs into your PPPs?
5. When involved in the PPP process, what are some of the key principles that guide your process or decision making? What currently takes precedence in policy planning and decision making or what is usually the overall goal?
6. To what extent are the public or communities, NGOs, business sector involved in policy planning and if their views are taken into consideration in decision making?
7. Are there current mechanisms or tools in place to monitor and evaluate policies, plans and programmes to track their progress and if they are achieving their sustainability goals?
8. Do you have suggestions for improving the current processes in respect to meeting the SDGs?

**Part 2: Introduce the idea of SEA and what would be needed to implement it**

1. To what extent are environmental and sustainability principles (social, economic) health and cultural impacts considered in policy planning and decision making?
2. Is there capacity or mechanisms to integrate the above considerations into current PPP processes? What would be needed to integrate a process or tool to enable this to happen?

**Part 3: Potential Barriers**

1. In your experience what problems have you found when trying to adopt new tools/process in policy and/or plan making?
2. More specifically, if the decision was made to adopt a tool like SEA for helping to incorporate SDGs in Tongan policies and plans, what do you think some of the potential problems/barriers might be?

## Appendix E

## Environmental governance instruments relevant to EIA

LEVEL OF GOVERNANCE	TYPE OF GOVERNANCE	EXAMPLE INSTRUMENTS
International	MEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention)</li> <li>• Convention on Biological Diversity</li> <li>• Convention on the conservation of Migratory species of Wild Animals</li> <li>• Convention on International Trade in Endangered species of Wild Fauna and Flora</li> <li>• United nations Framework convention on climate change</li> <li>• London convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter</li> <li>• International convention for the Prevention of Pollution from ships (MARPOL)</li> <li>• International convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, response and cooperation</li> <li>• International convention for the control and Management of ships' Ballast Water and sediments</li> <li>• Basel convention on the control of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal</li> <li>• Vienna convention for the Protection of the Ozone layer</li> <li>• Montreal Protocol On substances that Deplete the Ozone layer</li> <li>• Rotterdam convention</li> <li>• Stockholm convention</li> <li>• United nations convention to combat Desertification</li> <li>• United nations convention on the law of the sea</li> </ul>
	Policy, plan or programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Donor policies and programmes (e.g. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank)</li> </ul>
Regional	MEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convention on the Protection of natural resources and the Environment of the south Pacific (noumea convention)</li> <li>• Convention to Ban the Importation into Forum Island countries of Hazardous and radioactive Wastes and to control the Transboundary Movement and Management of Hazardous Wastes within the south Pacific region (Waigani convention)</li> </ul>



	<p>.....</p> <p>Policy, plan or programme</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy for climate and Disaster resilient Development in the Pacific</li> <li>• Framework for nature conservation and Protected Areas in the Pacific Islands region</li> <li>• Pacific Islands regional Marine species Programme</li> <li>• Pacific regional solid Waste Management strategy</li> </ul>
National	<p>Legislation (generic examples)</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Policy, plan or programme</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental Planning and Management (EIA) Act</li> <li>• Waste Management and Pollution control Act</li> <li>• Water resources Management Act</li> <li>• National Parks Act</li> <li>• Wildlife conservation Act</li> <li>• Fisheries Act</li> <li>• Land Use Act</li> <li>• Mining Management Act</li> <li>• Health and safety at Work Act</li> <li>• Public Health Act</li> <li>• Native Lands Act</li> <li>• Customary Laws</li> <li>• National Environmental Management strategy</li> <li>• National Green Growth and sustainable Development strategies</li> <li>• National climate change Policy</li> <li>• Joint national Action Plan (for climate change adaptation and disaster risk management)</li> <li>• National Biodiversity strategy and Action Plan</li> <li>• National Waste Management Plan</li> <li>• National Transport Plan</li> <li>• National Health Plan</li> <li>• Fiscal and trade policies</li> </ul>
Sub-national (provincial, district, municipality, community levels)	<p>Policy, plan or programme</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-based environment plans</li> <li>• climate change vulnerability assessments</li> <li>• climate change adaptation plans</li> <li>• Disaster risk management plans</li> <li>• Local strategic land use plans</li> </ul>

Source: SPREP, 2016


## Appendix F

## SEA Performance Criteria

Theme	No. Performance Criterion
<i>SEA is integrated</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensures an appropriate environmental assessment of all strategic decisions relevant for the achievement of sustainable development</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses the interrelationships of biophysical, social and economic aspects</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is tiered to policies in relevant sectors and, where appropriate, to project EIA and decision making</li> </ul>
<i>SEA is sustainability-led</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>facilitates identification of development options and alternative proposals that are more sustainable</li> </ul>
<i>SEA is focused</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides sufficient, reliable and usable information for development planning and decision making</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>concentrates on key issues of sustainable development</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is customised on the characteristics of the decision making process</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is cost and time effective</li> </ul>
<i>SEA is accountable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is the responsibility of the leading agencies for the strategic decision to be taken</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is carried out with professionalism, rigour fairness, impartiality and balance</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is subject to independent checks and verification</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>documents and justifies how sustainability issues were taken into account in decision making</li> </ul>
<i>SEA is participative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>informs and involves interested and affected publics and government bodies throughout the decision making process</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>explicitly addresses their inputs and concerns in documentation and decision making</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has clear, easily understood information requirements and ensures sufficient access to all relevant information</li> </ul>
<i>SEA is iterative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensures availability of the assessment results early enough to influence the decision-making process and inspire future planning</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides sufficient information on the actual impacts of implementing a strategic decision to judge whether this decision should be amended, i.e. that contribute to the overall sustainable development strategy as laid down in Rio 1992 and defined in the specific policies or values of a country</li> </ul>

*Source: Fisher, 2002, IAIA, 2002, Verheem, 1999*

## Key

 SEA criteria selected for analysis in this research